



UNRULY DAUGHTERS
by
JOANNE CARMINHOW

Part 1





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1987

INTRODUCTION

I met, for the first and last time, M/s Joanne Carminhow in September 1963 and at her request spent a weekend showing her around the area. She was at the time staying at a local hotel, being engaged on a 'photo-graphic safari'. After showing her the usual things, I took her over the fields to the site of Glottingham Castle. Here she became animated, and started dictating impressions and topographical detail into a hand recorder.

She went back to her home in France (she had an apartment on the Quai Valmy in Paris, and a country cottage in Nivernais) and although I did not see her again, we kept up a frequent correspondence until her death in January 1983. She acted as my record agent at the Bibliothèque Nationale and I for her at the British Library. It worked to our mutual advantage.

Two years after our meeting, I received a parcel, containing exercise books into which she had written the story I here present. I told her I found the story interesting but preposterous; upon which I received a sheaf of photostats proving to me that there was no inherent improbability in the story, and that each incident had indeed taken place, but on the continent of Europe. I explained that it was too big a job for me to produce while I was in full-time employment but that when I retired I would attend to the matter. With this she seemed content.

I retired in June 1983 but in January of that year JC was killed in a road accident. However, I have thought it proper to keep my promise and have thus produced the story.

It is said that everyone who writes fiction engages in a self-revelatory exercise. This must be true, for JC's predilections will become very obvious from the text. A naturalised French citizen, she was a monarchist (always quaintly referring to Marie Antoinette as "our beloved queen") with political views somewhat to the right of the John Birch Society! One may therefore deduce that the attitudes she puts into the mouth of her characters have more than a little to do with her own world-view. That she was an unrepentant feminist is patent; also that she had a taste for violence, quite permissible in 'costume' writing. She was herself quite violent in a twentieth-century context - she was a karate brown belt, she shot pistol, she fired crossbow, had a good collection of antique arms (not being short of a franc or two!) and when at her country cottage rode with the Rallye Piqu'avent Nivernais. Then, in the late seventies, she discovered the seductions of speed and bought a Harley-Davidson motor cycle. It was while driving from Colmar, in eastern France, to her home in Nivernais that she had her fatal argument with a Greek articulated lorry on National 7. By all accounts it was a terrible night, lashing with wind and rain; and her end was quick and brutal.

There is little more to say, except that her story (a kind of Perils of Pauline in steel!) is pure fiction but based on fact, and so interwoven into a strictly historical tapestry that it cannot fail to be of interest to residents of the locality. I have thought it proper to include her original foreword as it explains so clearly what she was all about.

I do not comment on the conception, except to say that it clearly meant much to its author. I have cut out one chapter - that describing the journey to Augsburg - and the death of Kate Cralle. Otherwise it is as originally written.

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

It is always satisfying to reveal and bring to recognition an unknown or little known facet of history even in a fictional form, since our knowledge of the past is grounded on a series of often misleading stereotypes. Moreover, as far as the history of women is concerned, so much has been suppressed by patriarchal writers.

The truth about women in the Middle Ages is not to be found in history books. It is to be found in the literature of the period. In the following chronicles if anyone disputes (for instance) that mediaeval men knocked their wives down, inflicting real and disfiguring damage on them, he or she is directed to Geoffrey de la Tour Landry's "Book of the Knight of the Tower" (1371); Jules Michelet's "Origines" is another fruitful source, as is Sir Thomas More's "Dialogues".

Or, if one prefers academic history, the situation has never been put better than by Sidney Painter of John Hopkins University, Baltimore, U.S.A.:—"The feudal male was chiefly absorbed in war and the chase. His wife bore him sons, his mistress satisfied his momentary lusts. Beyond this women had no place in his life, and he had no interest in them. They were freely beaten and treated in general with callous brutalitythe wife whose advice displeased her husband was frequently rewarded by a savage blow, but this must not be allowed to obscure the very important fact that she felt fully competent to express her views. Moreover, in the absence of her husband the lady was no mere valuable chattel in the care of his military or administrative deputies but the actual mistress of the castle and the fief. In both history and romance ladies appear directing the defence of their strongholds against besieging hosts.....vassals, servants, and wandering minstrels might well seek the favour of the lady of the castle".

This chronicle, then, deals with such a lady, and her friends, who would not adhere to the norm and claimed, and took to themselves freedoms which men possessed by right, but which they grasped by merit. To maintain their freedom from men's restraint they had to descend to men's level and engage in the violence and brutality that was so much a part of the period.

Living in days when women were regarded merely as mobile vaginas and not people with rights (the facts are set out very clearly in the text) this involved them in great danger and, in the end, violent death. In the fourteenth century women were indeed regarded as non-persons, made "not in God's image" as O'Faolin and Martines have opined.

All four main characters are amazonian, and three of them lesbian, the prevalence of which inside and outside nunneries is one of the little known facts of mediaeval life. In our own this can be regarded as the inevitable result of women gathering together for protection, surrounded as they were by an unequivocally hostile environment. Women are still second class citizens and yet there is nowadays a battery of protective laws which my main characters in this chronicle would have regarded as Nirvana. In those days full personality expression was not possible for women, although certain women, throughout Europe, did indeed batter at the doors of convention.

In warlike exercises, the evidence is quite plain that women did partake in this sphere of endeavour. It is not merely Jeanne d'Arc. This lady of course claimed that she never used her sword in battle. This is a statement that she would, of necessity, make, and yet it is quite impossible. The situations in which she put herself would have made it out of the question. Whether she did any scathe with her sword has never been proved, but it should be remembered that during the last part of her mission she was no more than a captain of mercenaries. On the bridge at Compiègne she "did her duty as a Captain" as a chronicler reports; it is therefore absurd to believe that she was not laying about her with her sword. Of Jeanne's personal courage there is no doubt whatsoever, and as she was so were other female mercenary leaders.

This point about Jeanne is made more elegantly by Marina Warner in her "Joan of Arc" (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1981): "The absence of effort to ransom her or save her also shows how far she had travelled down the doom path to banditry, from her position as heroine at the centre of the kingdom's loving embrace". The writings of hagiographers and panegyrist in succeeding centuries have tended, quite deliberately, to obscure the fact that to her contemporaries a female's involvement in war did not appear in any way remarkable. There had always been combative women of this type. Not every woman was content to produce children, to spin, and (as Catherine de Crulle says in the story) "to embroider an infinity of cushions". Something else was needed, deeds of derring-do.

For instance, Jeanne's contemporary, Yolande of Aragon, "Reine du Quatre Royaumes", led her army into the Battle of Bauge (22.3.1421) mounted on a grey charger, wearing steel plate and silver mail. She even, in old age and in an attempt to shame Charles VII into action, buckled on her armour again and strode into the Council Chamber offering to lead the army herself if he would not! Such a woman excites our admiration, or should. Then there was Jeanne Hachette who took such a leading part in the defence of Beauvais (27.7.1472). Her real name was Fourquet and the name by which she has come down to us merely means 'Jeanne of the Axe' just as Margaret de Boxhull, in my narrative, was known as 'Margaret o' the Axe'.

Then there are the female condottieri (or mercenary captains) of Italy, whose exploits and deaths in battle are wellknown on the continent of Europe. It is true that patriarchal historians usually refer to these women as 'viragos', as they do to the gallant Catherine Sforza. This is because they do not adhere to masculine norms, but they should be persons of pride to women everywhere.

It is sad that Englishwomen have never been prone to deeds of derring-do. There may be many reasons for this, but it remains a fact that the two most famous cases in English history of female courage were both French by birth - Margaret of Anjou and Charlotte de la Tremoille, the brave Countess of Derby, who defended Lathom House. Both ladies were vilified by male writers, as one might expect, Charlotte being accused both as 'the scarlet Whore' and having 'stolen the Earl's breeches when he had fled.....and hath in his absence play'd the man at Lathom. This is purely par for the course and the inevitable fate of ladies who step outside the male-imposed boundaries of behaviour.

Thus to my story of female assertiveness, which I dedicate to the memory of gallant ladies of the past, whether they refused to accept man's rejection of their claim to jurisdiction over their bodies, or whether, as in this story, they pitted their skills against the male predators in the never-ending war for personal freedom.

JOANNE CARMINHOW

PARIS
1981

(1)

The castle of Glottingham stood high, in a superb defensive position, where the great forest of Andredeswald started to thin at its southern limit. Although close to the village of Munfield, it was in reality in the parish of Echyngham, the church and manor house of which could be seen a league away to the north.

Originally the home of the ancient Glottingham family, it had fallen into the hands of the baronial de Echyngham family, together with so much else in the neighbourhood. They had first used it as a hunting lodge but added a curtain wall with high towers, converting it, with royal licence, to a castle.

The road from Canterbury to Chichester ran not far away, joining the London Road at the very gate of the Cistercian abbey of Rothensbridge, leaving it again where the wayside cross of St. John crowned the hilltop, before dropping down to the village of Munfield.

Along this dusty road came, early in the month of June 1381, a grave and ancient priest riding an equally ancient nag; black was his garb and black was the horse he rode. As it so often does, summer had come suddenly to England. May had been cold and wet, with unbroken grey skies. Now, as he rode, the Vicar of Salehurst, Sir William de Ukkefeld, sweated in the hot sun, squinting against the strong light as the castle came into view, above the trees. Advised of his arrival, Sir Roger de Boxhull raised a bushy eyebrow. He was a muscular man, squat, something more than thirty years, with a black beard and piercing grey eyes. Like his father, Sir Alan, soon to die, he had a reputation as a fighting man, obtained on foreign fields. Now home again to see his newly born son, he sat at his ease in a red and white doublet, his legs clothed, one in red, one in white, on opposite sides to the doublet. Opposite to him sat the Lady Margaret, playing the dutiful wife, attired in a blue gown, for Sir Roger liked her in blue. She had that high-cheekboned, patrician good looks that men found so irresistible. She murmured: "What can he want, husband?"

"We shall soon know". He levered himself out of his chair as the priest was ushered in. "Sir William" he greeted him heartily, "this is a surprise. 'Tis not often you cross the valley to visit Glottingham. 'Twas not always so, I mind".

The cleric bowed to the lady and allowed himself to be propelled to a chair, into which he sank gratefully. "Indeed no, Sir Roger". Nervously a blue-veined hand brushed back white hair. "Age must needs become a stay-at-home. In other days.....but I speak of times when you were but a boy".

He stared at Lady Margaret curiously. The bruise on her cheekbone indicated that Boxhull was dutifully carrying out the dictates of the Church in the matter of subjection of wives. She had too independent a spirit, needing control. She gave him back look for look. She and his niece, Ursula, had long ridden together. They were friends, two of a kind. Margaret lidded her eyes so that he should not see how sweet were the memories. She smiled: "Perhaps you have some private business to discuss, Sir William. I will withdraw.....".

"Nay, I insist that you move not. My business has something to do with you indeed". He pressed the tips of his fingers together, face creased into a worried frown.

Roger waited patiently, remembering that this venerable old man had taught him in piety, when he was a boy. The priest coughed and began. "My business concerns my brother's daughter".

"Ursula?"

"Ay, Ursula".

"But how can I help you, old friend?"

Bluntly came the answer: "I hear tales of rebellion, Sir Roger. You are a man of affairs. Pray tell me the truth of this matter. It has much to do with my visit to you".

"I dare swear that all you have heard is true, to my sorrow and to that of England".

"There will be rebellion?"

"I fear it".

"Men speak of an organisation of peasants called 'The Great Company'. Do you know of meetings in the greenwood, secret oaths and such-like abominations?"

"Have heard of them".

Tired old eyes, lichen-coloured, studied him carefully. Then: "Men say you are sympathetic to the rising, Sir Roger".

Boxhull smiled: "I neither approve or disapprove. 'Tis certain the peasants have many grievances and there is much truth in what is whispered in alehouse and tavern". He paused, frowning at his lady, who was becoming restive. "I would have you remember that many rustic knights disapprove of John of Gaunt and his friends, the Grossers. I am such a one. I tell you, Sir William, this Gaunt is a man in whom high-bellied pride goes hand in hand with inordinate avarice. I know him and it is so. To tell you the truth, England would be a cleaner place were he to be decently cast into the Channel with a cannon ball tied fast about his neck".

Ukkefeld was thoughtful for a moment. "Strange words. Yet, as I believe, true. For I have heard tales of this Gaunt, a man of great ambition".

"A man of ambition that knows no bounds". Boxhull stared at his outstretched leg complacency, then frowned. "But enough of Gaunt. I am a bad host. You will take wine with us?"

"I confess it would not come amiss" smiled the old man. "'Tis warm weather".

"Summer comes of a sudden in this land of England". They drank to each other politely, as the custom was.

Ukkefeld sighed. "Rebellion is a terrible thing, yet an uprising of the peasants is even more frightful. In the year I entered into the cure of Salehurst, men were speaking of an uprising of the peasants in France, the Jacquerie as it was called. It was put down with great cruelty".

"Have heard of it".

"I shudder lest the same should happen here".

"I share your horror, Sir William. The leaders of our peasants have military experience. All men are trained to arms from the age of fifteen. But ask me not who the leaders are. No man knows. But the lessons of the Jacquerie have been well learned. Only the King's Council seem unaware of the

facts. It is this that makes the rising so dangerous".

"Sir Roger" murmured the priest, "I am an old man. I have seen as much of life as I care to see. I have laboured in my parish for many years, and I see now that I have failed in my ministry.....".

"Nay, nay, old friend".

His smile was sad. "You are kind, yet I feel my life has been wasted. Men are as wicked as the day the Bishop laid hands upon me. And now.....rebellion. I have spent my life preaching brotherly love, and yet now I hear tales of secret meetings to plot treason. We are all brothers, yet they conspire to overthrow and murder men who are their brothers".

At this point Lady Margaret nodded vehemently but Boxhull frowned her to silence, and dutifully she subsided. More than once, since his return from soldiering, he had felled her for contradicting him. She knew the power of his fist very well.

"You will pardon me, Vicar, but 'tis not so. All men are not brothers, so long as one brother lives in luxury and grinds the other brother into the dust".

"Ideals are one thing. Hard facts are another" the old man pointed out defensively. "The case of the peasants is hard, this I acknowledge. The church agrees that there is a case for amelioration".

Boxhull sneered. "Even Simon of Sudbury?"

Taken aback the priest conceded the point: "Ah yes, Simon of Sudbury. He sits on the king's council, Lord Chancellor that he is. A brave man but with little vision, I fear. Simon keeps bad company, and should trouble come, he may pay for it with his head. But we speak of ideals and hard facts. The Great Company believes in no peerage, no knights, not even simple gentlemen. All shall be held in common, is't not so?"

"So far as is known, those are the facts, ay".

"And you still support the rising?"

Never one to countenance opposition, Boxhull's temper was frayed and he spoke harshly: "Harken, Sir William"

Margaret smiled, and it made her husband angrier. But Ukkefeld decided to be conciliatory. "This is a side issue, Sir Roger, and one upon which we shall not agree. Let us therefore return to Ursula, if we may".

Boxhull slewed wine around his mouth to moisten it and nodded.

"'Tis difficult for an old man, Sir Roger. Since my brother died I have cared for Ursula as best I may. But she worries me. Her manor of High Ridge is isolated. She is a brave maid but I fear for her should the revolt come. If she came to me....." - he shrugged helplessly - "the vicarage is no stronghold".

Margaret murmured: "No indeed". She thought of its timber framing and thatch.

"In short, Sir Roger, I would rest the easier if I knew that you would treat her as your own were something untoward to happen to me".

Boxhull's ill-humour ebbed away. "Assuredly, old friend, and with a will. But what cheer, man! What have you to fear? You are beloved by all".

Margaret smiled inwardly. Did her husband really believe that, or was it merely courtesy?

Old eyes swivelled round. "I am no fool, Sir Roger. The revolt, if it comes, will not spare the Church. We have mentioned the Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon of Sudbury. There is no doubt that he will die the hard way. The rabble's hatred of the parish clergy is different only in degree. But that is not the point. For myself I care little. Ursula is another case. She is the daughter of a knight, with great holdings, a lady of coat armour. If she has to die, I would rather she did so in harness, sword in hand, than butchered ignominiously". Boxhull's eyes strayed to his own lady, understanding very well what the old man was saying. "Please understand me, Sir Roger. My life is spent, but.....".

"But Ursula is young and lovely, is that not what you would say?".

"You understand very well, I see. She has much to look forward to, and these are troublous times. Moreover, she is not well loved, for causes into which we will not venture".

"Well, content you, Sir William" Boxhull nodded, as he glanced askance at his lady. "It shall be as you say. I suggest she is never far from her sword. A second lost might be a life lost".

"As imminent as that?".

"Such is my information. For us it is different. A sudden alarm and we have time to arm ourselves".

Ukkefeld nodded sombrely. "As your chaplain was saying to me not long since, Glottingham is not to be stormed of an afternoon. A hard nut to crack. And as for Ursula, she shall sleep in her harness, if need be, and her horse be saddled in readiness".

"'Twill be best. And now, Sir William, you will stay for the evening meal of course".

The man smilingly declined. "I thank you for your courtesy, Sir Roger, but I think not. Ursula is alone at Salehurst, and the smith, Haswell, whose daughter Ursula had to chastise, but a step away. I may be unduly fearful, but I prefer to risk nothing with the child". Child! Margaret felt laughter rising and choked it back. If Ursula was a child, what then did that make her? And the Haswell wench had deserved her thrashing. The lower orders had to be kept in their due place.

Ukkefeld intercepted her half-smile and shivered. Too close proximity to Margaret de Boxhull filled him with dread. That was as a priest. As a man he admired her. When he looked on her he thought about Norman blood, and the Viking marauders from whom they descended. In her husband's presence her wild and wicked spirit slumbered. Yet manly admiration would not down and under her merciless scrutiny he found himself reddening. Dear God, he thought, the damned bitch was reading him like he read his breviary. He tore his eyes away from her lips that were the temptations of Hell. What was Boxhull saying?

"Then will I give you an escort. The shadows lengthen and while my lands are outwardly peaceful, in these days I will run no risk".

The priest rode away with the soldiers and Boxhull returned to his lady. Looking up as he entered, she smiled: "'Twill be nice to see Ursula again".

"Ay, as old times" he agreed unsmilingly. "Have heard tales of that lady. As bad as her father was. Needs a man's control".

She did not reply. Ursula was hated by the peasants no doubt. Their cots were no better than pig-sties. She wore her arrogance like a cloak, and her contempt for the peasant was profound. Even Margaret had to admit that she often went too far, did Ursula. But they were loving friends and she would be happy to see her again.

Then, about the hour of Compline, Boxhull announced his intention of riding to Hastings in the morning to see John Halle. In a way, Ukkefeld's visit had decided him on what to do about the manor of High Ridge, and Mistress Ursula's safety. He had some kind of responsibility in the Hundred of Henhurst but he needed advice from Halle, who equal responsibility for the whole Rape. His mind misgave him for the Ukkefeld woman, about whom he knew more than his wife had thought fit to tell him.

As for Margaret, after he had left her alone, she spent some time reviewing her life with some pleasure. It had been eventful. She wondered how much Roger knew. Some, she imagined, probably most. That five years he had been away had been quite delightful. "Hold or die" he'd told her when he rode away. She had held. He had likewise said: "Fidelity I expect not". In both particulars she had obeyed him, and the thought made her chuckle. But it served him right. Any man who left a lovely wife for five years must expect to be cuckolded. But she knew well he had not truly loved her, not he. It had been Glottingham he had wanted. She had hoped he would be slain abroad, so that she would be freed from all restraint. But he'd had the devil's own luck. But life so far had been amusing. And now, was it to end? Had she known what awaited her, she would not have believed it. A wise woman had once told her that she would die in combat. That pleased her, daughter of a knightly house. She had shrugged. What would be would be. She tossed her embroidery across the room and sank deeper into her reverie.

As she sat brooding, Margaret had to admit that for a wench she had had a good life. That she had been a bastard, the result of a short-lived but torrid liaison between her widowed father and Mary de Haremere troubled her not a whit. There was no shame in being a love-child; you wore the baton of bastardy on your arms to indicate it, and nobody thought the worse of you. And her father had done the gentlemanly thing, taking her into his house and raising her as his daughter. Indeed, she had always been known as Margaret de Echyngham until she became Margaret de Boxhull. Her origins had been forgotten. She had never known her mother, who had died giving her life.

Yes, it had been a good life. Most wenches grew up accustomed to a very circumscribed future - marriage, children, disease and death summed it up very neatly. But not for Meg and Bess. They had grown up tall, beautiful and strong. Margaret and Elizabeth de Echyngham were names to conjure with.

In the early years, when their father had been much from home, their education had not been neglected, but it had been boring, oh, so boring. Boys, she decided early, had all the fun. But when her father returned from the war, Echyngham had become a martial house. He had obviously given the matter much thought. Without a son, his girls had to bear the burden of position and rank and, yes, wealth. For the Echynghams owned virtually everything for miles. Her father had been a soldier, and it had always been so, right back to Reinbert the Sheriff, from whom they descended, and before him doubtless from Viking stock. For the Normans were from the north originally, as she had heard. Both girls had been brought up arrogant, and they had been brought up tough, for her father had had little time for education for wenches. Nonetheless, the early years had left their mark. Margaret could read, and she could write (the latter with some labour), and she spoke French and Latin fluently. These were indispensable for ladies of her rank. But there it sopped. What did not stop was training in arms.

The two sisters were hoydens from the word go, romping in quite unladylike roughness with the children of her father's manorial tenants - the Shoyswells, the Haremeres and the Boxhulls. Margaret smiled to herself in superior fashion. Those land-hungry Boxhulls! The two families had always been friendly but her father had always looked down on the Boxhulls. The Echynghams didn't have to be too acquisitive. They were rich, had power and everybody deferred to them. But the Boxhulls were different. They were comfortably off, holding their manor by knight service; and she remembered hearing that years before her grandfather, wishing to dispose of his lands in Dorset, had offered them Brampton Bryan, which they had gobbled up eagerly. They were relatively lowly squires, gentlemen of course, but of no great eminence. That is, until Roger's father, Sir Alan, had gone to war, returning to be made Constable of the Tower and Knight of the Garter. On his hearing of it, her father had grunted incredulously! But they were on the way up, and had to be taken note of. She was thus not too affronted when Roger, her childhood playmate, became interested in her sexually. And when, in a turret room at Echyngham, he had laid her very sweetly, and enjoyed her for a good hour, she knew he was the man for her. As he had emptied himself into her, she had thought for sure that she conceive, but it was not to be. Nonetheless, the marriage was rushed and on 12th June 1375 she became his lady. She was 17. Elizabeth had jeered at her, but it was the purest jealousy.

At the age of twelve their serious training had begun. Not having a son irked their father consumedly and he was insistent that his strapping daughters should be taught the arts of war. The likelihood was that they would have to manage his great holdings and he knew well enough that it was not a task for weaklings. You fought to keep what you had, that was the first lesson. The second was that fear had no place in an Echyngham. So he had had mail made for them. And bascinets. And swords, remorselessly teaching them how to fight. And they loved it. He taught them to ignore bruises, even to be proud of them. Theirs was a noble house; it was their task to set an

example, to lead and to die well, if that was necessary. The men-at-arms looked on admiringly, cheering them on to greater endeavours, and laying wagers as to who would floor who. The lasses loved the company of the men-at-arms. They were a rough but good-natured crowd, full of fierce sounding oaths and bawdiness. They held themselves in a bit while the wenches were around, but not too much. As a result, the sisters were not easily shockable. The men tried of course, as men will, but they gave up when they saw that coarseness vied with coarseness. In the tiltyard, in periods between bouts of practice, they would laugh uproariously at some sally and their father would look on, with his grim smile, more interested in their skill and progress than in their characters. He noted that they feared nothing, not even the more cruel weapons like the flail. He decided they were shaping well.

Then when they were sixteen a man called Bennet Haselden returned from soldiering in Europe. It was in 1374, the year before she wed, the same year that young Ursula de Ukkefeld, fresh out Ruser nunnery, came to live with her uncle at Salehurst. Haselden had been with Sir John Hawkwood when he defeated the Milanese at Chiesi and had followed John of Gaunt on his campaign in France. Her father liked the man and so did Margaret. She had decided, then and there, that if she ever married she would ask her father to let Haselden follow her. The man had a rich fund of anecdote. One day in the tiltyard they squatted on the ground listening to him hold forth. They had removed gauntlets and helmets and sat there enthralled, listening at their ease. So did everyone else, the men-at-arms lounging around, and their father, keeping a supervisory eye upon everything.

Margaret greatly admired the armour that Haselden wore when he rode out. She had an eye for such things and always would have. Jewels interested her of course, but not as much as a good harness. She wondered how a private soldier could afford such rich armour, and had mentioned it.

Her father laughed: "He knocked an Italian knight out of the saddle to get it".

Delighted, she had clapped her hands: "It must be fun to fight like that".

Echyngham chuckled throatily. "You shall soon know. 'Tis high time you joust. You, Jack Lunsford, see they are armed for the tilt. They've rested long enough. I would see what my brave daughters can do".

Nothing loth they stood while the heavy jousting armour was buckled on, gurgling excitedly after the nature of their sex. The sisters loved each other dearly but that day Margaret conceived a hatred for Elizabeth. The men were laying their usual wagers on their performance and from what Margaret could hear, much of the money was on her. Maybe she was over-confident or careless, but as they thundered towards each other, Elizabeth's lance took her under the armpit and she was violently whisked from the saddle. Her lance went flying and she hit the ground with a crash. The breath was knocked from her and she could not rise, much as she tried. It was humiliating, the more so when a triumphant Bess, having dismounted, sauntered over and placed her mailed foot on her sister as a token of victory. She heard

her father laugh. "At this point in battle, you would kill your enemy. Or take him for ransom. I doubt not that Bess will spare you".

Margaret was furious. She had let herself down, and the men. And she hated Elizabeth. Nothing would do but that she should get back in the saddle and try again. "Ay, but not with the lance" laughed her father, "with your swords". So the jousting helms were removed and they replaced their bascinets. Margaret went eagerly and Elizabeth, too, was nothing loth. They mounted and went to it like blacksmiths. For wenches they were phenomenally strong as all the men knew.

Haselden pursed his lips: "There is anger there".

"Ay, 'tis so" Echyngham agreed. "A good test for both. One day they may have to do this in truth and I would have them know the feel of it".

It was a good ten minutes later that Elizabeth, after a ferocious attack from her sister, stiffened in the saddle, before pitching sideways and rolling in the dust. A roar of approval came from the men around. Honours were even, as her father remarked, not without parental pride. But they were to glower at each other all the evening, before going to bed, bodies aching from bruises. Margaret had enjoyed it greatly, but she had to admit that Elizabeth was a bonny fighter also. On the morrow they were friends again, bad humour evaporated. Ay, their father thought to himself, they are worthy to be my co-heiresses.

Then, just after Margaret's marriage, Sir William had received a letter from France, in response to which he speedily rode for Dover. While there he had wed, and bedded, a lady of noble birth, one Charlotte de Chanlecy, who it seems he had known before. She was soon aware that she had life within her, and it was arranged that Sir William should return to England to make arrangements for her reception, while she would remain with her parents until the birth, and then make her way to England with the child. Then came two great tragedies - Charlotte died in childbed, giving birth and Sir William, perhaps by reason of shock, took to his bed and died within three days. Bennet Haselden travelled to France to collect this posthumous son and on its arrival in England was packed off to Lady Isabel Cralle at Warbleton for raising. Margaret and Elizabeth, being only in their teens, could scarcely have been trusted with the task even had they shown any aptitude for it, which they certainly did not. Isabel Cralle was an Echyngham and loved children. It was the only thing to do.

Then Boxhull, one month after marriage, told his bride he was going soldiering in France. Margaret had protested and for her pains had been knocked unconscious. When she recovered, she swore to herself that no man should ever treat her so again. She was well aware that Alice Montagu had been battered to death by her husband in 1351 and that several other noble ladies had unaccountably died. Margaret was very determined not to be added to their number. So she said no more. Good looks are a woman's fortune and she had no intention of having hers marred by a man.

So, standing distraught but docile by his stirrup

she had heard him say: "Hold or die" - for as he explained, in his brutal way, if she failed to hold his lands secure and was alive on his return, he would put her in her tomb in short order. So he had gone, and Margaret had dried her crocodile tears and in her chamber, prayed that he would be slain in France.

Within twenty-four hours she was at Echyngham, conferring with her sister. "Well, Meg" Bess smiled, "we are both rich and free. Father is dead and Roger has gone. If fortune smiles, you may not see him again this side of the tomb and you can enjoy your jointure. As for me, I hunger for men, and I intend going where they are plentiful. To London, to Court. While I am away, I pray you overlook my lands; for though I have a steward, I trust him not. He will bear watching. Do this for me and you may take a tenth of the profits of Echyngham. I have no doubt that you will enjoy yourself in your own way. Every gentleman who passes your door will dent your bed, I doubt not; and being a blood-thirsty lady I doubt not that you will find pleasure in being a harsh mistress to the peasants".

"I hope to make them skip and jump" Margaret admitted seriously.

They had laughed together, and she had naturally said that she would do as Bess asked. She told her, too, what Roger had said and Bess laughed in her lazy way: "Why, Meg, he was always a pig. All men are. 'Tis a thousand pities you got yourself tied up there. But your appetite was always larger than your stomach. Fret not, sister. I will light a candle for his early end in France. In the meantime, enjoy yourself in your own way. And if you hear men speak of me as whore, take no heed. You will know your Bess is a very happy lady".

So Bess had ridden away, leaving her alone, and the mailed hand of Margaret de Boxhull descended hard on their joint lands. Taxes were gathered with meticulous care. If one pleaded poverty, the lady's eyes would harden. "Then shall you pay twice". The man would grimace and pay, for the chatelaine of Glottingham was known to have a flinty heart over such matters. She had a technique for tax gathering. In full armour, and surrounded by her men-at-arms, she would descend on her manors and gather her dues herself. It was not calculated to endear her to her tenants.

Her squire, Bennet Haselden, had seen some terrible things when soldiering abroad, and was not squeamish. Some landowners were very harsh but Lady Margaret was not one of them. Stern she was, grasping she was but cruel she was not. She was really a creature of varying mood. Sometimes, when giving judgements, she would be impeccably correct and fair. He had to admit, too, that the lands were quiet and well administered. No, Lady Margaret was not the worst among the magnates by any means.

Ursula de Ukkefeld, who had the manor of High Ridge, on the high land to the north of Salehurst, was another case entirely. She ruled with a loose rein and her men were uncontrolled; tales of rape and murder abounded, with what truth no man knew. Nor was this the worst. The woman was perverted. She liked women, and not just to lay with either. There were dungeons at High Ridge and, if stories were true, she liked dressing as a page and whipping young women there.

These stories were doubtless greatly exaggerated, the peasants delighting in spreading calumnies about their betters. Yet she was bad enough, by the common consent of her equals. All men hoped these were merely the sins of a rich and self-indulgent young woman.

Thank God, Haselden thought, Margaret de Boxhull's tastes did not incline that way. She was all fleshly lust, it was true, but for men. And being all powerful, she always got what she wanted.

Nor was that all. She had qualities, edifying qualities. Being a good captain, her first thought was for her men, and only then for herself. The men idolised her, as he well knew, and would follow her to Hell. A plentiful supply of meat and ale, and regular pay ensured unquestioning obedience. Moreover, as he had to admit, she was one of those rare wenches who understand and appreciate a goodly man. Without once trying to bridge the gulf that separated them from her, she would laugh with them, joke with them, a captain with her soldiers. She had the gift. More, they knew she could be trusted not to run at the first sign of trouble; the truth was that she loved a good fight. Haselden had never met a woman like her. Equally, she knew there was nothing she could ask of them that they would not do willingly. The wonderful thing was, Haselden mused, her being a wench and all, that she never asked her men to do anything she would not do herself. If a charge was called for against an enemy, she would fearlessly lead them. The woman had guts and for such a wench any one of them would have died. Not that Haselden had not known her quality long ago. He'd seen it at Echyngham in old Sir William's time. She was all woman but part of her was a man too.

All woman? Haselden chuckled at her bodily needs. Leading them, her backbone would be made of steel, like her harness. But once in a gown, her voice, once hard, would become soft and seductive, calculated to make his cock swell to bursting just to hear it. Of course, she was not for the likes of him, but for her own kind, who now beat a path to her door with increasing frequency. It was a dream Haselden had, laying this brave warrior lady, and emptying himself into her. But he knew it would never be. She was too blood-proud. Other ladies might take their squires, but not Lady Margaret. He was a poor man's son and she of the nobility. He would have to be content with being close to her, buckling on her armour as a squire should. Maybe he'd die in her arms. That would be good too. Yes, he'd settle for that.

One afternoon she called him to her presence. He found her busy at a table covered with parchments. She motioned him to the settle. "Friend Bennet" she began, without raising her eyes, "the men grow stale, think you?"

He grinned: "Been no blood-letting for a while, more's the pity. All quiet".

"As I thought". She tossed down the quill, happy for the respite. "What think you of Dallington Forest?"

"A nest of vipers. Could do with clearing".

"As I thought" she said again. "A nest of vipers indeed. We will clear it. Sir Thomas Hoo writes that I should do what I think best to make the road to the west safe for travellers. Not my land but I am the nearest with sufficient power. How think you?"

Haselden knew what she had in mind. A day's hunting, but the prey would not be boar but outlaws and footpads. As she said, she had sufficient power, more than enough. She could have two hundred trained men at her beck before daybreak if she chose to move quickly. "It likes me well, Lady Margaret".

She smiled. "You are the man for me, Bennet. I think a hundred men should serve. Collect them tomorrow and arm me before mid-night. Surprise must be complete. Must be in position before dawn. Full battle array, Bennet. The outlaws will fight like cornered curs. Cut them down without pity. Those not slain will decorate me the tallest tree in the Forest. 'Tis understood?"

"Ay". It was harsh but necessary. For long afterwards a sweep such as this was known in Sussex as "Boxhull medicine". It was a strong purgative but effective. "Will keep my counsel till break of day".

"At least until all men are assembled. We be not overly loved". Her lips twitched. "There be traitors everywhere". It was true enough, thought Haselden. There were many at Glottingham besides fighting men and one never knew who would blab.

So the Boxhull medicine was administered and it was an unpalatable draught for many. In a long line they rode through the forest and everything human that moved was hunted down and killed. It was distasteful to Lady Margaret to kill lightly armed men but it was necessary. There was resistance of course, arrows and the like, but she lost only one man, leapt on from a tree and despatched in the dewy grass. By midday it was all over. "Mayhap it be not clean" came her bleak rejoinder to Haselden's grim question, "but some weeds have been plucked and that must make it a safer place".

Two weeks later she was glad that she had cleansed the Forest of the lice that infested it. Giles Ford, doing his three hours as sentinel on the tall west tower, reported a large entourage had turned from the Lewes to Battle road at the place men called Hoods Corner. Haselden found her in the mail she habitually wore, pacing her chamber, reading a letter. She barely raised her eyes when he reported to her. "Say you so? Keep it in view and report as to its quality".

Visits like this were not infrequent and the lady welcomed them. It was a diversion that she enjoyed greatly. It was mostly curiosity to see her, whose reputation had spread far and wide, not only for her warlike qualities but her tendency to co-operate with all men, in womanly-wise, providing they were of her station. Among her equals she was known as "the best lay on the Canterbury road" but to the lower orders simply as "the Boxhull whore". It was a misuse of the word. She did not ply for hire as did Elizabeth. Lady Margaret's favours were given generously, although she would, if urged, receive a gift, say a ring, a necklace or some such bauble. If the man was young and handsome and had given her satisfaction, she would graciously take nothing for her hospitality. But a man's quality dictated his reception, for she was blood-proud with fixed ideas as to the fitness of things. Free with her favours she might be to members of her class, but to others she posed merely as a lady bountiful in the matter of entertainment two floors below. Her attraction was undoubted, with dark hair rasping on ivory skin; men boggled at the mere sight of her. If her body was magnificent, her sexual manners, for that time, were impeccable and those permitted to drop anchor in her bay considered it the high point of an otherwise pedestrian existence. And while she was earning her well-deserved reputation in Sussex, Elizabeth, in London, was achieving her nickname of "An-Acre-a-Night Bess".

By the time the travellers had reached the village of Brightling, Giles Ford's keen eyes were able to establish that it was some kind of ecclesiastic. This was something new. Priests instinctively avoided her contaminated presence, describing Glottingham as a "hell-hole of iniquity". Hearing of this, Lady Margaret was prone to laughter. But not today, when Haselden stood before her. "An ecclesiastic?" she shrilled, "what the Devil can he want?" Bennet, who was allowed great freedom of utterance with her, speculated that the gentleman of the cloth wanted her help with his orisons. She pushed him out, shrieking for her women. Margaret had three, all gentlewomen, for she could not abide the hand of a peasant to touch her. Her favourite was Kate Cralle, a flaxen-haired girl with a quite deplorable twinkle in her blue eyes. She came from Warbleton, recommended by Margaret's aunt Isabel. Catherine de Cralle was wild and had come most willingly to Glottingham, for she knew the chatelaine was a kindred spirit under whose tutelage she would gladly put herself.

Margaret speedily divested herself of mail and by the time the man had reached Munfield, she was arrayed in a splendid yellow gown that revealed a tantalising glimpse of opulent bosom, but not so much as would shock a priest, and the glory of her hair, fresh combed, would have seduced a statue. She was as fair a picture as a man could wish after a day in the saddle. She looked like a duchess and Haselden, entering her chamber on a pretext (as she knew well) could have sworn that she swam towards him, a glorious yellow swan. And all his blood rushed to his member, of which she was animatedly aware. With a knowing smile she dismissed him. Walking down the stairs with some difficulty, Bennet readily admitted that she was a fine piece of flesh.

The ecclesiastic turned out to be a Bishop, no less, and French to boot. On an embassy he had visited the shrine of St. Richard at Chichester and was now in his road to Dover to take boat to France. As he was ushered into the lady's presence he understood at once why Master John Courdray, the Archdeacon of Lewes, had winked so blandly, and tapped his nose so lewdly, when he had spoken of her. The Bishop was charmed by what he saw, bowing low over her hand, before she kissed his ring. He was not old, as Bishops went, somewhat of forty years, Margaret guessed, and more of a gallant than a Bishop. He regarded her keenly, for he had heard much of this female warrior. She was not like he had expected, God knows what he had expected. An amazon certainly, tall and strong, but also a grand lady. Her gaze was frank and fearless, almost truculent; it irritated him while at the same time stimulating the lust that was never far from the top of his head. These English amazed him. She begged him to share her evening meal. Naturally he agreed. She summoned Haselden, ordering him to attend to the rest of the Bishop's party below stairs. Bennet bowed and withdrew, grinning to himself, noting his mistress's heightened colour and suppressed excitement. Alone again the lady and the Bishop sat facing each other. He complimented her upon her cellar. The wine was Anjou, yet he had been assured that the English drank mostly Gascony and Bordeaux.

"There is Rhenish, if you would prefer it, my Lord Bishop. I mind my husband liked it well".

He smiled. "You speak as if he was dead, yet he lives, as I hear tell, to our great hurt". She shrugged. "Does the wish father the thought, I wonder?"

It was her turn to smile. "My Lord, the question!". They both laughed. He felt at home. Her French was flawless, which was as well, as he regarded English as a barbarian language.

The man surveyed her with care, observing the agitated bosom, the provocative smile and he felt a sudden movement in his loins. She laughed softly and he asked what was amiss.

"Naught is amiss, my Lord Bishop" she returned with silky allure, placing stress on the word 'amiss'. Her voice was now becoming lower, huskier by the moment; and he was becoming harder by the second, uncontrollably so. Damn the bitch, he thought, that makes me forget who I am, what I am. He then asked her, thickly, whether she was sure nothing was wrong.

"'Tis but" - and here she laughed heartily with all the unrestraint of a woman who had long since consigned clerical disapproval to the limbo of her mind - "we, the English, are taught that assuredly all French have horns and tail".

He too laughed heartily: "Is it not strange that this is what we are taught about the English. Especially after Crecy. I think it proper that should prove to each other that it is not so".

Knowing he was trapped, she smiled, pouring a liberal measure of wine. They drank deep to ease their parched throats; her much practised eyes locked with his, hotly stripping the gown from her body. Lady Margaret knew herself to be wet, savouring limb-dissolving desire. Breathlessly she answered him: "I too had the thought".

Thus Margaret de Boxhull bedded with a Bishop of France. He greatly enjoyed the undressing of her. Greatly expert, he was no priest at heart. An old scar on her body stopped him in his tracks. "Lady.....your side" he faltered, "'tis a wound?".

Her laughter was light. "Your concern touches me. Yet 'twas a small thing. A weak link in my mail, no more. 'Twas four years ago, in practice". She bore her scar with pride but could not expect him to share it. He said no more; indeed he could not, for he was monstrous, near to bursting. Yet later, as they lay quiescent, her face rendered even lovelier by ecstasy, his lust temporarily satiated, he regarded her with awe. And in the morn before he left he respectfully asked to be shown her equipment. Smiling, she rose from the bed, quite shameless in her nakedness. Margaret smiled tolerantly, reaching almost reluctantly for a linen robe. Having given Roger as many horns as would sink him in the Channel, it was a scene that had been acted out in her chamber many times, men being as they are and she being what she was. But she was proud to take him into her armoury, and display her armour and weapons. He stared in silent disbelief. Having laid her he knew her strength - the grip of her hands on his buttocks was a memory he would long cherish - and before he asked the question he knew he was being foolish: "Can it be that you, a lady, wield those terrible weapons?".

"Have done and will do again, doubtless".

"You have slain men?".

"Many" she replied truthfully, "sometimes 'tis a social duty. Yet these were not worthy of my steel. I yearn me to slay a knight in combat".

Forcing a smile, he tore his eyes from the spiked ball of her flail and the cruelly ridged mace. "Had heard many tales about you. I did not believe. I now believe". The compliment was implied but she sensed his underlying disapproval. Men did not understand, would never understand what a lady could do once she set her hand to the task. "In my own country" he went on, "many ladies have the ordering of their estates. Yet I have not met such a case".

"They miss so much". Sad was the wag of his head. Men's disapproval of her proceedings was a fact of her life, and she shrugged with monumental unconcern. "It may be I was intended to be a man".

"It may be. Have heard of such cases. Many of our ladies took the Cross and went on crusade. Most lived but a few were slain. The Margravine of Austria died gallantly in battle I am assured by the chronicles. It may be that you are such a one".

Margaret honoured these ladies in her heart. "As you say. To die in defence of the Holy Places.....can a Christian ask more?".

He bowed low to her spirit, seeing that she meant every word she spoke. "And now, Lady, for mine entertainment, will you not accept this ring? 'Tis a mere bauble, a pretty toy you may think, suitable to adorn a lady's finger. Yet its history doubles its worth. It belonged to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of our King Louis and your own Henry of Anjou. It went with her on crusade and was taken from her finger only at death by the nuns of Fontevrault, from whom I had it. Until this day I had found no lady worthy of it. 'Twill sit fair on your finger, Lady".

Wide of eye she took the single red ruby, set in gold, and knew not what to say. But she took it gratefully, with many protestations of unworthiness, which he brushed aside with a half-smile. Then she sank to her knees, kissed his ring of office, and begged a blessing.

No longer a lover but a priest, he sighed in embarrassed fashion. "Daughter, I am, as you have seen, an unworthy priest, feet deep in the clay of the pit. And yet, my office sanctifies me, and a blessing shall you have".

She watched him leave. From the saddle he bowed to her and then departed towards his own country, still throbbing with her delights. And she, in her chamber, stared reverently at the ring, slipping it on her finger to admire it. Then she locked it away, until such time as she could wear it. It would be hers until she were encased in lead.

Bennet appeared, unheralded, at the door, saluting his captain as was his wont. "Ah, Bennet, fetch me Kate Cralle". And Kate, when she appeared, mischievously enquired if she had had a good night; at which Margaret invited her to attend to her own concerns, but with such good humour that Kate giggled. "Come, Kate, no more fooling. I have much to do this day. Get me out of this and into something more suitable".

Within the hour she was sitting at her ease and Haselden standing before her. She gestured towards the settle. "Sit you there, old friend. We have matters to discuss. But first, will you not share this hippocras with me?". He reached out for the spiced wine, wondering within himself what this betokened.

"You may recall that yesterday comes a messenger with this letter. Was a-reading it when you came to tell me of the Bishop". Nodding, he sipped the wine. "'Twas from my footloose husband, commanding me to join him for Christmas at the town of Bayonne. What think you to that?".

He grinned: "That you be a lucky lady".

"That remains to be seen, Bennet" came the grave response. "He does say he hungers for my body. Hmm! I fear he intends, by hook or by crook, to get me with child".

The man hardly knew what to say. It was her duty, yet she hated it, feared it. She had told him long ago that she had no fear of meeting a man in combat, yet dreaded childbed. She'd had prodigious luck, had the Lady Margaret, laying around as she did. The men were saying that she was unprofitable, barren but it was not so, could not be. She was a lovely, lusty woman. Tamely he opted for geography: "'Tis a fairish step".

"So I think. Where is Bayonne".

"South of France, nigh unto Spain" came the ready response. "Was there once. But I do marvel at Sir Roger, knowing your ladyship's dislike of the sea. From Southampton one can take boat direct to Bayonne. Or Bordeaux. But 'tis a long voyage.....".

"You say true. I am no friend to the sea. What do you advise?".

He scratched his chin, dubiously. "Yon messenger brought news of a truce entered into last year by which Calais, Brest, Bordeaux and Bayonne alone remain in English hands. Brest is the nearest, and your ladyship could travel by land south to Bayonne".

Margaret flicked back her dark hair, regarding him humorously. "Did purpose to cross the narrow seas to Calais". She was half jesting, for it would have suited her temperament to travel the length of France, with a hostile populace around her.

Haselden's eyes bulged with horror. "'Twould be folly, Lady Margaret. Every step your horse took to Dover would be a step away from Bayonne. Nay, Brest is the best way, the shortest way".

Her laugh was merry and filled the chamber. "As you say, Bennet. I did but jest. Mistress Ursula will ride with us and she likes not risk. Not that she is not a gallant lady but.....you understand?".

He nodded. "Yet she shapes well in combat. I know, for I have watched you both in practice. There is no white blood there. And just as well in this world of ours. Yet I understand your words. She is not like you".

"Quite so. Thus, Brest it must be. Sir Roger desires me to travel with sufficient power for he speaks of two carts to escort back. Plunder, doubtless". There was a concentrated flare of amusement in her eyes. "Mighty exercised about plunder, Sir Roger, as you know well, Bennet". Haselden grinned broadly. "So, I thought thirty of my men, and thirty of Ursula's would suffice".

"Nay, I like not that" Haselden grunted. "The men of High Ridge be an undisciplined lot. No offence meant, but Mistress Ursula rides with a mighty loose rein. They would slit your throat for a gold goblet. Rather, take thirty of Lady Elizabeth's men and thirty of your own. Dick Shoyswell is a good soldier and keeps good order at Echyngham. 'Twould be safer that way".

It was a right judgement and she agreed immediately. "But I like not leaving Glottingham so long. It cannot be but that we shall be away for two months. Must have a strong man to rule here in my absence, what say you? For it goes without saying that I need you with me".

"No problem there. John de Knelle. A good man, a good soldier and honest to his finger ends. All will be safe with Knelle. Your ladyship remembers him, doubtless. A gentleman born, once served the Wardieux but they have fallen on evil times, and he seeks a place. Came here once, your ladyship remembers. You turned him away saying you needed not two squires, no doubt true, and yet.....".

"I was wrong?"

"As I said at the time. He would be worth ten pounds a year. A young man and I grow long in the tooth".

Margaret laughed heartily. "Well, let it be so. You may now arm me, Bennet. We ride to Mistress Ursula's this day".

So John de Knelle was hired. His parents held Knelle of the Manor of Rothersbridge and as it was on her way to High Ridge, she attended to the matter herself. Knelle was a compact looking man, broad of shoulder, bearded and possessed of the most fearless grey eyes she had met. He bowed low over her gauntleted hand. "'Tis certain you will not lose by serving the lion gules of Boxhull instead of the martlets of Wardieux" she opined.

"I doubt it not. Your ladyship is the wonder of our age".

Christ, the man was a courtier as well as a soldier. She smiled, her eyes automatically dropping to his loins. Well endowed too. "Attend me at Glottingham tomorrow or as soon as your convenience permits". Again he bowed low. She closed her visor and turned her horse.

Their path led them, on this occasion, through the vill of Rothersbridge. Usually Lady Margaret went along the valley, half way to Echyngham, then by a track that climbed the hill steeply. This way led them over the causeway over the flat land then by a twisting road that climbed ceaselessly. Margaret's eyes were everywhere, for the road had an unsavoury reputation. Then they crossed the boundary of Ursula's land and immediately saw the result of Ukkefeld justice. A partially decomposed corpse lay in the roadside ditch, maggots seething. Margaret merely glanced at it but Haselden muttered in his beard. Further on, near the top of the hill three blackened, sightless corpses hung from the branch of a tree. Bennet grunted. "Mistress Ursula spends her days mighty profitably".

Margaret laughed gaily. "Ay, we all have a duty to keep the king's highway safe to travel. We do our share, friend Bennet".

She had instinctively defended her friend, yet she shared Haselden's feelings in some measure. Ursula's cruelty was a byword. Once she had obtained the lease of High Ridge, she had invited Margaret to join her for a cleansing operation on her new estate. Thinking she needed guidance, Margaret had gone; but Mistress Ursula needed no guidance, merely a spectator to admire the swiftness of her justice. Lady Margaret had a sense of proportion; Mistress Ursula had none. It took much to sicken Margaret de Boxhull but the sight of Ursula's sword running with peasant blood achieved that result. Very well, it was Ursula's estate, and she was the mistress of it; a lady of coat armour, Ursula knew her rights very well indeed and she exercised the rights of life and death capriciously. The result was that the young woman was hated as few landowners were hated. One did not correct an equal in public but in private Margaret advised moderation in all things. Since that time Ursula had been more circumspect, and her excesses had been private rather than public. But Margaret de Boxhull understood her squire's feelings very well. And then the towers of High Ridge came into view, and beyond them the blue goodness of Kent delighted the eye.

Ursula gurgled at the prospect of Christmas in Bayonne and seeing Robert Braban, Roger's squire, had its attractions. Margaret wondered whether Braban loved the girl or whether it was the manor he wanted. Probably the manor. After all, he had been aggrieved when his father had leased High Ridge to the Ukkefelds. And why not? It robbed him of his birthright.

"What say you to Dover? Then Paris".

"Are you mad, dearest Meg?", Ursula's big eyes became even larger. "A fair way to get our throats cut, that".

Margaret laughed until the tears ran. "Nay, I jest. We go to Brest from Southampton. We shall be well attended. Sixty men-at-arms. Should be enough?".

"Why so many?"

"Roger's orders. Carts to escort back".

The lady's fair hair danced as she laughed. "That Roger! The prince of plunderers".

"A good tutor in Knollys. And the Boxhulls were always acquisitive".

"True. And when do we leave?"

"The first day of December has been set. Ample time for you to prepare".

"Indeed". Ursula became dreamy. "You know, Meg, I think I shall wear my bronze harness. Not the new one from Augsburg but the one I wear for serious business. You know, the Italian. Braban will like to see me in it. And peel me, doubtless, when we arrive". She giggled.

"Not to mention that all men will stare at you".

"That is a consideration of course". They both laughed, confident in their womanly power. Meg poured herself more wine and looked about her.

She loved coming to High Ridge because Ursula's private apartments were luxurious. Since her uncle, the vicar, had given the house to her as her residence she had beautified it in magnificent fashion because she was as rich as a pepper-sack, as the saying was. The tapestries were magnificent, her canopied bed a thing of wonder; the floors were tiled and covered, not with rushes but with animal skins. The cuisine of her private table was French, with excellent wines, and the table service was silver, a joy to behold. She even had stained glass in the chamber windows, a great refinement for the time. What a pity it was, Margaret thought, that she was a pervert. But Margaret, when she heard of her friend's deviations, merely shrugged. A high born lady was entitled to her pleasures, whatever they were.

Naturally, only close friends like Margaret dined with her in private. Most meals were taken in the old way, in the Great Hall with her men, heated by the central fire; here the tables groaned with capons and pies of immense size. At High Ridge nobody was ever stinted in their needs, whatever they were. It was a crying shame, as the men agreed, that their mistress liked bedding with young women; but they had a good billet and were not disposed to criticise, lest their own iniquities were questioned. And it mattered nothing to them if their lovely mistress liked dressing as a page and whipping girls in the dungeons. She was a great lady and could do as she wished.

Those communal meals catered to the lady's feeling of omnipotence, which she was still young enough to savour. They were her defenders and the instruments of her will, whatever it was. This appealed to her blood pride and her arrogant soul. So had she been raised by her harsh father, and could be no other than she was. She realised that though she was obeyed, her men did not love her as Margaret's men did her, but it was enough. After all, she reflected, Margaret de Boxhull was something special.

As for Margaret, Ursula's bed attracted her greatly. At that time she had nothing like it; she would have after her visit to Bayonne and an even grander one, but at that time she was jealous of it. More, she was totally unaware that she was in love with Ursula, but the bewitching Ursula de Ukkefeld, the product of a nunnery, knew it quite well. It was merely a question of crooking her little finger really but her lesbian instinct told her that Meg was not quite ready for it. Meg's reputation with men nauseated her but she knew that her powers of seduction were considerable. The longing with which she looked at her bed was indication enough; sometimes she smiled inwardly when she saw Meg fighting a brave rearguard action against her inclinations. Well, Ursula told herself, she could afford to wait; and it thrilled her to know that when that dearest of women came to accept her need, Meg would be hers to the grave and beyond. Ursula was a most hot blooded lady and sometimes in her lonely bed she would lay in sinew-cracking fever for the splendid lady of Glottingham. She pinned her hopes on this God-given journey to Bayonne, for it was obvious that they would be in close proximity, on a daily basis, for more than two weeks.

Margaret, as she rode home immersed in silent thought, was at a loss to know how to proceed in the matter of Bayonne and she thanked God for Bennet Haselden. She ran her estates efficiently and well but the logistics of getting sixty men and horses to Brest daunted her. She hated admitting to herself that she needed a man to lean on, but she did; this was something totally outside her experience. But with Knelle in post, Haselden was free to organise it himself. An old soldier, it provided him with little trouble. He rode to Southampton and hired ships and did it all so well that Margaret and Ursula only had to put themselves at the head of the men and ride. The men-at-arms were instructed to take orders from Ursula as from herself, for Lady Margaret was far-sighted. Naturally, Ursula took her woman, Bessie Lockerson and Margaret took Kate Cralle. Being gentlewomen both went armed but Margaret knew that in an emergency they would be worse than useless. On Ursula she could rely in an emergency, and indeed her moment came on the return journey, and she was not found wanting.

The sea was an environment that Margaret did not know and distrusted mightily. On land she was capable; at sea she was ill at ease and had to call upon her inner reserves not to let it show before her men. But they sailed into Brest on an almost flat sea and she breathed a sigh of relief. But there were still problems. Despite the absence of swell, the unnatural motion gave Ursula and many of the men mal-de-mer. It thus was that a day had to be spent in Brest getting their land legs again, and it was that evening that saw the only dangerous incident of their outward journey.

Ursula had been prostrate all day, alternately cursing and moaning. Margaret and she had had to stay at separate hostelrys, with their woman, and squire, and Margaret was about to retire when something stimulated her to visit her friend. Clad only in mail, and with a dagger at her belt, she set out for the nearby inn, followed by Haselden as bodyguard. At the tavern, he waited downstairs while she ascended to Ursula's chamber.

As she entered, her whole body tensed. Ursula was laying naked on the bed and some villain crouched over her, holding a knife to her throat. Margaret took it all in quickly, the fear that rippled in her friend's blue eyes like water, the alarm on the man's face as he turned. An unsavoury fellow he was to be sure; but nothing was said. He came off the bed, lunging at her with his knife. She took the blow on her left forearm; at the same time her right hand dropped to her dagger. With great fluidity of movement

she drew it, her arm sweeping upwards in a deadly arc. She poniarded him at a blow and he dropped, screaming the agony of his guts. Life was cheap and it was no more than swatting a troublesome fly. It was all done in a minute. Ursula raised herself on her left elbow, watching the man's death agonies with pleasure, outraged that such a low born fellow should have dared to lay dirty hands on her. Vengefully she gasped: "Finish him, Meg!".

"Wasted labour". Coolly Margaret bent down, cleaning her dagger on his jerkin. "And there's blood on your throat". She watched the hands gripping his belly grow lax and drop to the floor; only then did she smile coldly and sheath her weapon. "Your jewels I suppose?".

"Ay. Came through the window".

Margaret went to the door and called for Haselden, who came running. "Bennet" she murmured calmly, "rid me of this carrion. Then return to my lodging, taking Mistress Lockerson with you. Guard her and Kate Cralle all night, also my effects. Then have one of our men guard this door. Giles Ford for choice. I will sleep with Ursula this night". The orders came with staccato precision. Haselden thought, what then of womanly indecision. Only he had seen the flare of anticipation in Ursula's eyes, which she had instantly lidded. He went out, dragging the carcase by the feet. "That's that" Margaret remarked dismissively.

Huskily, Ursula murmured: "Ay, you settled his business in short order, dearest Meg". She sighed: "How brave you are".

Meg shrugged, unconcernedly: "'Twas nothing, Ursula". Yet the accolade had moved her strangely, and she frowned slightly to cover her embarrassment. Reaching up to the lacings of her mail she felt a cool, white hand on her own, and a pleasureable quiver ran through her body.

"Nay, dearest Meg" whispered Ukkefeld softly, "I pray you let me strip you".

In bed they played with each other for an hour. It was a new experience for Margaret. And she wept a little. "I did not knowI did not know" she kept saying, with a little sob of happiness, as that much practised hand hovered between her legs. Outside the door, Ford heard the gasps and moans, and grinned. It was a wonderful night for both women. Ursula risked all and whispered her love; then her head flopped back, eyes staring, red lips parted under the impact of Meg's passion. Ukkefeld smiled triumphantly, and later tenderly, as she stroked the dark, glossy hair. At last, at last, she kept saying to herself, we are together, in bed; only death will separate us. She knew, with a frisson of distaste, that Meg loved cock too, but that did not matter. From now on they were lovers, that was the important item. In the morning she woke, head between Meg's breasts; it was the happiest day of her life. Even those heady days at Rusper nunnery, where she had been initiated into the delights of smooth, satin skin, paled into insignificance.

That morning, everyone recovered, they set out on the long ride to Bayonne. As they passed through Brest's south gate, with the Boxhull banner flapping in the breeze, the winter sunshine playing on gleaming steel, they were a brave sight. So much so that the townspeople, used as they were to such sights, stood and stared. Yet, as Margaret would admit in retrospect, it was an act of folly. And yet she enjoyed it greatly. All mounted they made better progress than she had anticipated. And yet it was to be the 20th December, 1377 before they rode into Bordeaux. That day a messenger was despatched to Bayonne.

Sir Roger had been a very worried, not to say angry, man. His lady's letter of intent had reached him much too late for him to reply, ordering her to take ship direct to Bayonne. This is what he had expected her to do, quite forgetting her hatred of the sea. It would have been so easy, for there was much traffic between the wine-growing areas of south-west France and England. Then he recalled his wife's unshakeable belief that if God had intended men and women to take to the sea, He would have given them fins. He glared at the letter (which, he noted sourly, was penned charmingly by Ursula, and merely signed by his spouse) and let out a roar of frustration that brought Braban running.

Tossing the letter to him, he had snarled: "Is she quite mad?"

"Nay, merely Margaret of Glottingham".

"She is not your wife" growled the knight. "You may well jest".

Braban shrugged: "As proud of her as if she was. She says rest easy. So rest easy. If it were anyone else I would worry. But not with Lady Margaret. As good as any man. And she has a goodly company around her".

"But half the length of France, man. Truce or no truce.....".

"'Twill be good to see her again. Have met no finer lady on our travels".

Boxhull jeered: "Your eyes are full of High Ridge".

"It may be. And yet I mean what I say".

"I know it. Cannot be mended now".

But, my God, he thought to himself, it is a journey that would daunt even me. Then he chuckled ruefully. Meg would be in her element, he knew, willing trouble to happen. But if he died for it, she would return by sea. All the way. Who did she think she was, Knollys? The damned woman thought she was as good as any man and was. Then her messenger arrived, a man he knew, which brought a grin to his face.

Had he known what was happening at that precise moment, his hair might well have stood on end. They had scarcely left Bordeaux following the west bank of the Gironde when they espied, about a bowshot to the east, on the opposite bank of the river, a body of men. They rode parallel, not attempting to ford the river, and Lady Margaret was in no way concerned. She knew what they were of course before she heard Haselden's growl. Soldiers without employment, ravaging the country, pillaging, raping, looting. Being a wise commander Margaret turned inland, away from the river but when she looked back she saw them fording the river.

"Will they attack?" Ursula asked hopefully, throwing back her fur cloak so as to reach her sword the easier. Lady Margaret turned her head and glanced at her friend, surprised, through the vents of her visor. Her lips twitched in amusement. It was strange about Ursula. In a gown, vulnerable, she was as timid as any lady; yet once encased in her magnificent bronze harness, with double plate on the left, or blind side, there was something of the lioness in her. Haselden had been right. There was no white blood in Ursula. How alike they were. Raised in violence, she was nothing daunted by danger. Margaret chuckled, she could not help it.

"They will not attack. They are twenty-five, we more than sixty".

Yet still the men followed, at a safe distance. Margaret took it for about half an hour, then she lost her patience. With Bazas in view, she raised a steel hand, bringing the cavalcade to a halt.

"Bennet" she grated. "You have soldiered in these parts, know their tongue as well as I. Ride you to them and bid them make ready to fight". Inside her bascinet, Ursula was heard to gurgle delightedly. "And if they will not, if they be cowardly vermin as I suppose, bid them void the field, for they do weary my eyes".

Haselden turned his horse and rode, while Margaret and Ursula placed themselves at the head of their men, swords in hand as a precaution, though Margaret knew that only twenty-five fools would attack sixty. They watched the exchange from far off, not hearing; then, as she had guessed, those who had followed for so long took themselves off. When they had gone some way, Haselden returned.

"What said they, Bennet".

"Nothing I could tell your ladyship" he returned, darkly, and mighty red of face to be sure. Margaret laughed.

"Cowardly knaves!" Ursula snapped, venomously ramming her sword back into the scabbard.

Margaret turned in the saddle in time to see Bessie Lockerson sign herself. Turning back, her lip curled in disdain. Such patent cowardice baffled her. Lockerson was as well protected as any lady of her class, and even had she fallen, what then? One has to die some day, somewhere, and what better way than impaled on steel? Plainly the woman was a craven bitch. She thought slightly better of Kate Cralle, although doubtless she too had given herself up for lost. Meg wasn't too sure about Kate, however. She had Echyngham blood in her and could not be all of a piece with Lockerson.

"Well, lads" she remarked, "all this has hindered us somewhat, with a pox on it. So press we on as fast as we may. 'Tis a thousand pities the French will not stand and fight like we English. It may be the cause is that they eat not beef. How think you?". Her sally brought forth laughter, and many gruff oaths of agreement.

Knowing nothing of this, Sir Roger and Braban rode out to the village of Dax on that very day without result, which nettled him not a little. He knew it was the only road for in that time the Landes had not been drained. So on the twenty-second they rode out to Dax again, and around midday, Braban thought he saw, far ahead, what he thought was the glint of winter sunshine on steel. Something leapt in Boxhull's breast. Had the stupid woman won through against all the odds? They rode to the top of a rise and stared out along the road to Mont-de-Marsan. He knew it was she, it could only be she. As a soldier he admired the tight discipline of the company, formidable in size as he had ordered, and fronting it two figures in armour, with fur cloaks, and behind them his own banner, flapping redly in the breeze from the sea.

"Damn it, Robert" he muttered savagely, "what ails me? All my mother is in my eyes". And it was true. Hardened soldier that he was Braban laughed uncertainly. He was not looking at Lady Margaret at all but at the splendid bronze figure to her left, at the Ukkefeld arms, and he saw it swimmingly, and brushed his eyes and sniffed. In the sunshine she looked more gold than bronze, a vision for any red-blooded male to delight in. Yet Ursula, seeing them, had a contraction of the belly and her heart sank. In measurable time she would have to submit to Braban's attentions and all that might follow from it. But as her mother had told her, that is the fate of ladies, what they are born for.

And her mother had trod the byways with some devotion, so much devotion indeed that her father had finally strangled her in bed. Nobody remarked on the two big bruises on the white column of her throat where his big thumbs had bored into her. Nobody dared. She had been laid in Framfield churchyard in an unmarked grave, by the church wall; he would not have her in the family vault, and she a Carminhow from Cornwall, as good and ancient a family as you could find, although not so rich as the Ukkefelds. And she, Ursula, had been packed off to the nunnery in short order. But as to Braban, she had no real objection. The poor devil deserved his manor back, and an heir. And there was always the chance, soldier that he was, he would be slain. She sighed, and decided there was no alternative to submission, it being a man's world, more was the pity. She sighed.

Boxhull's chest swelled proudly. She had come to him bravely, in high chivalry; and he who had wed her only to get Glottingham, found himself choked with emotion at the sight of her. Although she had only been a means to an end, he had always known she was quality in every sense. Yet he was angry too. The folly of the woman! He resented the big-hearted courage of her, and her success. It was an affront. And yet when they met on that French road, his emotion completely crushed his anger. And the words they spoke were of the ridiculous nature that always accompanies heartfelt relief.

"So, wife, here you are at last".

"Ay, here I am, husband, according to your command".

He turned his horse lest she should see his feelings but she knew and with womanly satisfaction. Later, in their chamber in the house he had rented in the town, he sent a grinning Haselden packing and unbuckled her armour himself, while (as he thought fleetingly) Braban was peeling Ursula like a grape on another floor. Margaret let him have his will with her, savouring all her power as a woman. She saw the thick, stubby fingers fumbling with the straps, almost cracking with desire to reach her. She laughed lazily: "Have a care with that plate, husband. Has served me faithfully, many a league". He grunted, going on with his business. He then undid the lacings of her mail until eventually she stood before him in all her glorious nakedness. She looked as strong as he remembered, and disgustingly tanned and healthy. With her hands on her hips and hair rustling like a summer breeze through ripe corn, she was the best thing he had seen for months, certainly since the Italian marchese whose slim throat he had cut after enjoying her for a night. But Margaret was his lady; there she stood, her sex throbbing, aching for his great cock to enter her. After all, she'd been untypically abstemious for a month, give or take a little play with Ursula. She watched as he tore off his clothes, laughing delightedly at the size of his member. He pushed her back roughly on the bed and she gurgled like a girl in her first adventure. Then lust engulfed them both.

Later she was to regard him clinically. "Husband" she murmured as he played idly with her breasts, "you have improved. Practice?"

"Some" he admitted, grinning. "And you too I doubt not". No lady answered that question with impunity, so she merely smiled. "You have changed, Roger. You go grey around the temples".

"Had you been at Limoges, you would be grey".

"Ah!". Yes, being a soldier's daughter, Margaret knew the ugly face of war. You lost more than your innocence.

"You return home soon?". Please God he says no, she thought.

"Not yet wife. I am committed to Knollys for some time. And there is much for the taking. I would be a fool not to stay soldiering". She joyed to hear it. "And you need no help, from what I hear. It seems I wed Penthesilea".

She glowed to hear him talk so but walked warily. "Why, husband, when you rode away you said Hold or Die. I have held. Meg is no weakling, and you should thank God for it. I rule hard but I am just. The lands are quiet, the peasants cowed, the taxes collected with rigour. No man could do more".

"There then remains but one thing. I must have a son, Meg. So let us to it again".

In fact, love formed the major part of her stay in Bayonne. Not that she was reluctant. One day her lust would grow rusty, but until that day she was as eager as anyone. As she was wont to say, with a shrug, that was what life was all about. And if she had to bear a child, well, that was a lady's duty. She was, however, anxious to see Bayonne, of which she had heard much. It was very heavily fortified, guarding as it did the passes over the mountains to Spain. So, snugly wrapped in a hooded fur cloak, she was shown around the town. Roger had duties to fulfil and it was during his absences that she and Ursula did shopping; they also bedded, when they could do it without risk. With many a giggle they compared notes on their men, as women will. But the social life of Bayonne had its attractions, especially at Christmas. There were many lords and knights in the town and Margaret's fame enough to ensure her a very happy time. As Margaret and Ursula displayed their considerable charms, Boxhull and Braban looked benignly on. Both had good reason to affect tolerance, Boxhull for his heir and when Braban looked at Ursula he saw only acreage and a sturdy, towered and moated manor house on the border of Kent and Sussex. Then there was one's religious duties to undertake at the Cathedral of St. Marie. But it was always back to bed, while a fire crackled and spat comfortingly.

Christmas Day dawned clear. For a moment Meg forgot where she was and what day it was, but when she recalled, she was out of bed quickly, absurdly excited. It was the day to give and receive presents. After Mass that is. It was a day she would always remember. It was not the Mass that made it memorable, nor the light meal that followed. There was to be a banquet later at the Chateau-Vieux, a castle raised on the Roman walls and she wished to do it justice. So she ate frugally. Roger surprised her in a fleeting smile. She deflected his enquiry easily. Her thought had been what would happen when the gentlemen were in their cups, what was known as wenching time.

She had brought Roger a sword. Not a battle sword, but a dress sword, the grip inlaid with gold and precious stones. He was much moved, and she was pleased. It took much to stir him to enthusiasm. She was all amazed when he produced a necklace of rare stones that would not have disgraced the throat of a princess. "By St. Mary!" she gasped, "'tis the loveliest thing". Then somewhat breathlessly: "Whose pretty neck did you have to slit to get it?"

Boxhull shrugged, grinning at a happy memory: "Some Italian marchese. But I made it easy for her".

She stared, wide of eye: "You speak true?"

"I speak true. Ask Braban else. He settled her waiting woman".

"I believe, I believe. But poor lady! How made you it easy?"

"By doing it when she expected it not. I dared not let her live. She had seen our strength, which was not great. I had to protect my men". Suddenly he reminded her, sternly, of the facts of life. "If Glottingham were ever taken by assault, you would be despatched in like fashion".

She nodded. It was known to her. A commander looked after his men. One day they might stand between you and death.

"But enough of her, Meg. Content you, she died bravely, like the great lady she was. She had stayed behind to defend her castella, most gallantly i'faith. Had to smash her to the ground with my sword. She had given us much trouble, she and her men. She knew I would slay her". Meg stared gloomily at the necklace for a minute, then brightened. "She is not important, Meg. You are the important one. And I have another present for you, one that will please you more than the necklace, I dare swear. Come. 'Tis not far, but under lock and key". She followed him, wonderingly, along a passage and down some stairs to a locked room. With a grin he unlocked it and went in, she following. Her squeal of delight was of itself a pleasure to him. He knew well that she had always wanted Milanese armour, accounted the finest in Europe. She had indeed an imported harness but this one he had had made to order. Margaret could not trust herself to speak but touched the gleaming steel almost reverently. It was double strength on the left side, as was Ursula's she thought proudly. Boxhull watched her in high good humour. He knew well how to please his lady. It had cost him a pretty penny but the money had been worth it, just to see her face.

"'Tis this new fangled complete plate. Straight from Italy. A special order, just for you, Meg. But see, the armourers are always making improvements. The gap between the arm and breast-plate, of which you always make complaint, has finally been closed with a roundel. In time doubtless all harness will be made so. But I will go bail you are the first lady in England to wear it".

"I doubt it not, husband" she murmured softly, "'Tis a thing of wonder".

"It pleases you?"

"Pleased!". She hugged him. "You know well that a good harness pleases me more than any gown".

"Ay, I know it. I wanted you to be well protected. You bear my responsibilities while I make us rich. 'Tis but fair.....but hear me wife. The steel is magnificent let me tell you. Afore I ordered I insisted on a demonstration. English archers are the finest in Europe, yet even my men could not break the steel".

"I believe. And I thank you with all my heart. Let my body render homage this night".

"All that for a harness?" he joked.

"But what a harness! I am a soldier as much as you and value such things".

"Ay, 'tis what you are, by God, unbelievable though it be. What would I do without you, Meg? You are a true soldier's wife. What men do with lesser wives is beyond me. I am specially favoured".

"It pleases a lady well to know that her lord appreciates her". Her lips twitched. "'Twas not always so, I think. I saw well how it was when you met me on the road".

"I was a worried man" he admitted, with face-saving gruffness. "That you should have made that journey, and you a lady". He wagged his head in mock concern. "And should trouble have met you, what then?"

She was astonished. "Why, Ursula and I would have met it. Remember, I am a de Echyngham".

"A circumstance I am not likely to forget".

"I remind you of it enough".

"So you do. But now, mark me, Meg". He locked the door behind them, and placing his arm around her, walked her up the stairs. "This is serious business now, no more fooling". She was all attention. "You go back by sea. All the way". Sensing she was about to rebel, he squeezed her hard. He could have beaten her into submission in accordance with the Church's dictates but he had mellowed. More, he wanted a son and by now life might be a-growing in Meg. "Spare me, wife, and harken well. Downstairs in the inner courtyard, guarded by men I can trust, are two wagons laden with plunder. I want them safe back at Glottingham. You are the one person I can trust. Well, mayhap Ursula too, but you whatever. The quickest way is by sea. You had pleasure riding through France to me, this I know. But I cannot allow it this time".

"I hate the sea" she muttered, morosely. "Or was the armour just to sweeten me before this pill?"

"Nay, sweetheart" he laughed, "'tis not so, think what you will. But this is important, Meg, to both of us. In those two wagons are sacks of money, gold plate, works of art, weapons, and now your new harness will be added, greased and wrapped in sacking. We shall live richly. There are tapestries from Italy such as you have never seen; they will adorn our walls royally. Nor have I forgotten women's stuff. There are rolls of silk, brocade, velvet. 'Tis your task to get it all home".

"I will, rest easy".

"Ay, but mark me yet again, Meg. A man is but a man. Your men worship you, I know, but greed is in all of us. The wagons must be guarded day and night. I know your men to be good fellows, but the sailors I know not. The sea is their element, and you are at their mercy. I trust not these Tarry Johns. Thus, you must never shed your armour; eat in it, sleep in it. Once out of it, you are vulnerable. And the same goes for Ursula, for I have given her command of the wagon in the second ship. She is to be trusted?"

"Ay, to the death". She then told him, with much humour, of the incident on the banks of the Gironde; he groaned, holding his head. "So you see" she concluded, "she is a brave wench. She is my dear friend, and I know her well". She stopped short of telling him just how well. "She would have dropped at my side without complaint. Moreover, she knows she would have to deal with me, else".

He grinned. "Ay, that should keep her loyal in truth. She is good with her sword?"

"Fair. I have given her lessons. An apt pupil with a liking for blood".

"As I have heard. 'Tis well. God help anyone who is craven in this world of ours". He chuckled in male disparagement. "That bronze harness of hers, that looks like gold, and turned my squire's head so much. Very pretty. 'Tis quality?"

"The very best. Flemish. 'Tis but that Ursula likes to be stared at. She is a lady. And she knew it would please Braban".

"Ay, ay. Braban cannot take his eyes from her, or his hands either from what he tells me. Think you she will take him? He certainly wants her, if only to get the manor".

"She will take him. Often she speaks of it. Ladies of family do not often marry for love, but for liaison, as you know well. That is well enough for peasants, not for us. Ursula understands this very well, Robert's body pleases her enough and I doubt not that they have suffered mutual delights this Christmas".

"'Twas why I asked you to bring her".

"Ay, but remember she is a Royal Ward. She cannot marry without the king's permission".

"That can be met. We have friends at Court, not to mention Bess".

Margaret started to laugh. "True, Bess has many friends at Court. She would help".

"Doubtless, if need be. But Meg, I hear tales of her". The bearded face wagged disapprovingly. "I hear tales of Ukkefeld too but Bess is family. That she should have taken that road.....".

Margaret defended her sister, not without heat. "She is happy. Let her be".

"But a whore, wife! Her name is a byword. But you know my mind. Happy is she? The people of Echyngham are not happy, as I hear tell". She wondered how he knew that. Who did he correspond with? His knowledge often surprised her. She was immediately wary. Men were strange animals, she thought, denying to ladies the same freedoms that they assumed as their right, even denying them jurisdiction over their own bodies. Most ladies, she knew, lived in subjection but she, Margaret de Boxhull, would never accept such conditions.

Then he told her the news he had kept from her for some days on grounds of pure selfishness. "Your squire, Haselden, lies sick. Unto death as we think. 'Tis dysentery, Meg".

She was angry. "Why was I not told? Must go to him".

"He wanted you not troubled".

"Like enough. He is that kind of man. But he is an old servant and friend. 'Tis my place to be troubled".

"Well, well". He shrugged, unable to contradict her. "The fool drank water from the castle well. Have myself seen men pissing into it".

Margaret threw on a cloak and hurried to the castle with unladylike haste, he trailing behind her. Bennet lay on rushes in an empty chamber. The stench was foul. Margaret, in her amber gown, knelt by him.

Haselden croaked. "Nay, mistress, you should not have come".

"Where else would I be, Bennet" she murmured, in a soft womanly tone, much distressed. "They did wrong to keep it from me. Have you not served me loyally and well these many years? But what cheer, man! You mend. We'll ride together again".

He smiled wanly. "Nay, I do not mend. I am finished with old England, Lady Margaret. We'll never hunt boar again, Dallington way". Tears pricked her eyelids for she knew he spoke truth. She took the big hand and bent down to kiss his forehead. He seemed grateful. Boxhull, lounging in the doorway, frowned at the roof.

Haselden moved painfully. Then he sighed in some distress: "What will you do when I am no longer there". Later he laughed in self-mockery. "But I prattle like a fool. John Knelle will serve you well. A good man, an honest man. And now, mistress, I am a-wearied. I would sleep awhile".

"God bless you, Bennet" she whispered.

It was in the morning when Roger was arming her, that news came that he had died in the night. Margaret wept. "You'll see him honourably buried, husband? Though no gentleman.....".

"I swear it".

"Not in some hole like a common soldier. I mean in lead".

"It shall be as you wish".

"He was like rock. I.....we owe him much".

"Rest easy, wife. I give you my word as a knight. And as you now lack a squire, I loan you Braban. He will see you home, then return".

"Why not give him to Ursula? 'Twould be fitting".

"Fitting but not sensible" he grinned. "Nay, Dick Shoyswell can serve her well enough. Want you to have someone to lean on, if need be. Now, hurry, Meg. The tide waits for no-one. Certainly not Margaret de Boxhull".

As he walked her to the ship, he knew there could have been no other lady for him. She was taller than he by half a head, and exuded an air of confidence that was mighty reassuring. He had sent the Ukkefeld woman on ahead. He liked her not; men said she was sick in the head. Braban was welcome to her. Margaret suited him well, although her knightly pretensions made him grin. "And Meg" he commanded, "if you bear a son, he will be called Alan. 'Tis understood? If 'tis a wench, I care not".

"'Twill be a boy I am sure".

"'Tis so to be hoped, Meg. A man needs a son to come after".

Braban and Ursula were already there, behaving like lovers were supposed to behave. The wagons were already on board, firmly lashed, and under guard, and there was nothing to keep her.

She found it strange, the pain around her heart when he and Bayonne vanished into the distance, and she had to shake herself free from her thoughts. Braban was looking at her curiously but also, being separated from Ursula, admiringly. He was a normal male. She ignored the spasm. "All should be well, Robert, think you?".

"Ay, Lady Margaret. If we guard the wagon well, and Ursula does the same".

"She will".

"And if we meet not a storm. Remember the time of year".

"A comforting thought".

In fact, all was well weatherwise until Brest appeared to the east and they headed into the Channel. Ursula's ship was some way in front, about half a league Braban thought. As they came within sight of the Channel Islands the captain pointed to the west, where a mass of dark clouds heralded trouble. "'Tis a storm, lady" the sailor announced grimly, "and at this time of the year, snow". Even as he spoke a strong wind took the sails and the ship seemed to leap forward. "Will have to run before it till it blows itself out. Dare not turn into it for fear of capsizing. We carry much weight. Would go to the bottom in a trice".

Braban muttered: "'Tis true enough, my lady".

"Ay" she returned bitterly, "and with all this steel we shall go to the bottom like a stone. But no matter, it cannot be mended. Let each man look to his horse and get what sleep he may". She wrapped her cloak around her. "You and I will take the first watch, and may God help us all". What she was thinking about her husband was scarcely complimentary. The storm came like a whip-lash and in the blizzard they lost sight of Ursula's ship. They were not to see it for several hours. They clung to the wagon for support, trying to talk, for mutual comfort, above the wind and the creak of the ropes and woodwork. The horses were restive and nobody slept; in the event she and Braban stood guard all night, lashed by snow. Margaret prayed, a thing she did very seldom, and cursed alternately. Braban's oaths were rounder and more picturesque but Lady Margaret's ears were far from delicate. They had no trouble with the sailors, but Ursula was not so lucky. But then, she did not have Margaret's reputation.

Ursula stood guard in the same way, with a man at arms. Truly frightened by the violence of the wind, she wished herself snug and warm in her manor house. She said something to her companion and when he did not reply she turned quickly to see him on the deck, a knife in his back and blood trickling from his mouth. Alarms started ringing in her head. Turning she saw three men approaching, daggers in hand. For a moment she stood like one graven in stone, then all her instincts and training took command. First, she slammed her visor shut, for to a woman her face is her fortune. Then she went for her sword, not before time. As Haselden had clearly seen, Mistress de Ukkefeld had no white blood. The first man dropped, her sword through his body. Then a vicious sweep of Flemish steel totally decapitated the second man. The sight of the jerking trunk and severed head rolling over the heaving deck, sent the third man screaming for safety. For a moment she stood, knees slightly bent, waiting for the next attack but none came. It was all over very quickly and she had no remorse at what she had done. How far the captain had been privy to the attack she could not be sure but he put on a fine show of outrage. She watched impassively as the bodies were tossed overboard, cleaned her sword and scabbarded it. Ursula felt omnipotent and stifled a yawn. From now on she was given a wide berth, and the new respect was balm to her soul. She yearned to retail the story to Margaret.

The lady of Glottingham, however, was becoming more and more certain that she carried embryonic life within her. It was merely a womanly instinct, no certainty, yet she was convinced of it. Tough-minded, she put the thought from her, consulting with the captain as to the situation. He was not comforting. "'Tis blowing itself out, lady. But 'tis too strong to do much else but run before it. Southampton?", he laughed, "'tis long since past, lady. That be the coast of Sussex. As for the other ship, it may have foundered for all I know. Please God we come not to grief on the Goodwins, that is all" and he signed himself devoutly.

Actually they were lucky. The storm was indeed lessening and the snow reduced to a flurry. Braban asked about Hastings. "Hastings? Nay, master, I cannot turn against the wind. See you those cliffs? They are to the east of the town. If you strain your eyes you will see Winchelsea on the hill, and further over yet, Rye. I will try for the estuary. And see, there if I mistake not, is the other ship" and he pointed far in front where Ursula's ship was making good progress into Rye's wide estuary. Braban sighed: "Luckier than we deserve, Lady Margaret".

"Ay, but thank God, Robert".

"Why, I do. But shall be mighty glad to be on dry land".

"Wet land, I think you mean. One can see the snow from here".

"By which token we must buy two oxen. Horses will be no use for this employ. The wagons would be stuck afore we had gone half a league".

"Well, one thing at a time, Robert. Link by link is chain mail made. Will think about oxen when I am off this deck, with a pox on it. Knew I was right to hate the sea".

At this time the captain of Ursula's ship was bewailing the loss of his men to her sword. The lady shrugged with arrogant unconcern: "Can take on new men at Rye".

"Not I" came the growled retort, "you know not of what you speak, Mistress. These Cinque Ports men be stiff-necked and proud. Will wait till I am in Southampton". She treated his scowl with contempt as he added: "Had I not been paid well for this task, would have seen you dead before I risked my ship with so few men".

As for Margaret and Braban, they sighed their relief at being on land again. "God save England and the port of Rye" Braban muttered, half to himself.

"Amen to that, Robert. Only 'tis not over yet. Will not be happy till I see the towers of Glottingham".

Giles Ford was sent to buy oxen, meanwhile the other men, mighty green about the gills to be sure, manhandled the wagons onto the quay, while others yet went into the town to buy provisions. The Rye men stared at them curiously. Ursula, who had arrived first, enjoyed the effect she was having, but Lady Margaret disdained such display. She was always conscious of her position, her rank, and of being of the older nobility. What was permissible to a family who had been ennobled hardly more than a century ago, and who derived their wealth from merchants in the City of London, was one thing; but she, an Echyngham, taking their wealth from great territorial holdings, was too great a lady to take pleasure from display. Though Ursula held many manors, there were grades in nobility as in all else. Yet two things united them - their friendship and their love. So she was overjoyed to hear the tale of her lover's valour on board ship, and she looked at Ursula with new eyes. Braban, too, looked pridefully at his lady.

"So you scratch, kitten, do you?"

"I had no choice".

"I believe you. 'Twas well done. My lessons were not in vain".

"'Tis wonderful to fight like that" Ursula sighed dreamily. "And 'tis so easy to slay, is it not, Meg?"

Margaret and Braban exchanged a glance, at once worried and amused. Braban was about to speak when Margaret frowned him to silence. "Ay, 'tis easy". She put her arm around Ursula in comradely fashion. "'Tis certain you do not disgrace your spurs". Braban thought so too, but held his peace. Margaret could have said much else, pointing out that it is not always as easy to kill an enemy, especially if he is as well equipped as you; but she would say that in private, not before others. She had no mind to humiliate her lover in public, or let others do so, hence her frown to Braban. He understood well enough, perhaps too well, Margaret thought, having seen a muscle in his face tighten. It was quite obvious to Braban, from Margaret's defence of the valorous Ursula, that they were intimate. And as a man it sickened him. But being a landless squire he said nothing. They were rich, self-indulgent, noble ladies while he.....

It started to snow again and they walked up and down to keep warm. It was more than an hour before the oxen were in the shafts and everyone assembled. Kate Cralle, like many of the men, had been seasick and sore afraid for her life, and never ceased to complain of the cold. Margaret, loving her, said nothing for a long time, merely looking at her askance, but after they had passed through Udimer and the carts had become stuck in the rutted road for about the tenth time, she finally lost patience. With a grind of steel, she turned in the saddle.

"Kate" she snarled in sudden fury, "if you cease not your damned babble, I'll knock you from the saddle". Braban grinned to himself and there were grunts of approval from the men. Cralle flushed and glared at her mistress through the vents of her helmet; but she said nothing, knowing her mistress only too well. "'Tis no worse for you than for the rest of us" Margaret went on softening her tone slightly. "Mark me now".

After Udimer had been passed the road ran through unrelieved woodland. Margaret had no time to admire the prettiness of the snow piled deep on the tree branches. She knew just how vulnerable to attack, did one come. But she comforted herself with the thought that only fools would be out on a day like this. The snow fell heavily on them and from time to time they shook their sodden cloaks to get rid of it.

Their journey was slow because oxen are slow beasts but only they could navigate the road with ease. Many times the horses slipped on the packed ice beneath the snow. The description "Sussex full of dirt and mire" was current in her day and she knew how true it was. The road from Rye was long and desolate. In many ways it still is. After Udimer no village stood athwart it. The road ran along a ridge between two great inlets of the sea, which today are the valleys of the rivers Brede and Tillingham. To the south of them was Forde Place, standing virtually on the edge of the water, of which an occasional glimpse could be caught where the woods thinned.

There was no time to halt for eating. They ate as they rode. The men had bought bread and cheese in Rye and munched as they rode, with many an oath as to the snow making the bread soggy. Then someone grumbled about the lack of ale to wash it down. Margaret laughed, bidding them remember the buttery at Glottingham. The grumble sank to an appreciative growl.

Beside her, Ursula marvelled greatly. In French she said: "You handle men well, Meg".

"'Tis a gift. They love me and would die for me. And I think of them first. 'Tis easy, sweeting".

It was not that easy and Ursula knew it. She could not handle her own men, not like Meg did, easily. She could never have that easy, comradely relationship with hers. In the end it came down to respect, mutual respect. Meg would laugh and share a joke with her men, whereas she had to take refuge in imperiousness, rank. She needed a man to prop her up, Braban for choice. But Meg? The idea was laughable.

About three in the afternoon they came to a crossroads and Margaret led them confidently straight over it. "In a while we shall strike the London Road" she explained, "and, my friends, we are nearly at our journey's end. Little more than an hour. About time. This cold eats into one's bones. But think of it, lads. Beef and mulled ale. Can a man ask more?". Behind her there was a rumble of approval and Giles Ford was plainly heard to say, after a string of oaths, that he could eat a horse behind the saddle. Margaret laughed aloud. "And so you shall, Giles. so you shall".

Once on the London Road it was indeed better going. There was a sharp to the left near St. John's Cross. It was there that they first caught sight of the towers of Glottingham, crested with white. A ragged cheer went up from the men, almost numbed by the cold. Margaret smiled happily, hoping John Knelle kept a tight ship. John Knelle did and by the time her party had made its way across the open sward, the drawbridge was down and he on it to welcome his mistress.

Knelle asked her, in all innocence, had she had a good journey and she told him curtly, no. Then she recalled her manners and forced a smile to her cold face: "John, you are now my squire" and she told him about Haselden, as they walked up the keep stairs together. "Then he died, John, to my great distress. And before he died he recommended you to me. Therefore, John de Knelle, you are my man". He bowed. "Come, John, the courtesies can wait. You can do your office. I have worn this harness, with a plague on it, for days, ever since I left Bayonne and I am much wearied. And see to its treatment. It has taken much snow and I would not have it rust". She glanced at Ursula with some amusement. "I doubt not that Master Braban will service Ursula, but after me, attend to Mistress Cralle. She will need aid". The Lockerson woman was Ursula's responsibility, she thought.

Catherine de Cralle lifted her bascinet, removed her arming cap and shook her golden hair. Wishing to make amends, Margaret crossed to where she was, kissing her before holding her at arms length. "Kate, dearest Kate, forgive me. But I had to maintain discipline. A loose tongue does great scathe. You were repeating yourself, my dear".

"And would you have struck me from the saddle?"

"Cheerily". Kate knew it well, and they laughed together, Kate a little ruefully. She admitted she deserved it.

Ursula joyed to have Braban's hands unbuckling her harness but flushed under Margaret's keen regard, her twinkling eyes.

The mistress of Glottingham was too tired to care about Knelle's expert ministrations. She stood there patiently as he divested her of her protection but her belly rung hollow. Kneeling by her, he heard her rumbling with hunger and grinned up at her. "Ay, John, I need a plate of beef and wine. By the Mass, how I do need it". Then she bethought her. "And John, place men to guard the wagons, men you can trust, mark me. I have not brought them this far to have the contents filched now. There is silk there, John, brocade, satin, women's stuff, not to mention a new harness, a present from Sir Roger". She stopped short of mentioning the gold service, the coin and the jewels. It was too early to trust Knelle completely. She would come to it, but the time was not yet. Her necklace was in her pouch and would soon be locked away.

Knelle ate with them and listened, astonished, to their adventures. Margaret said little, being too hungry, but listened to Ursula's bubbling recital. Yet, her needs satisfied, and lounging at her ease, she prodded Ursula to recount her valorous deed. And when she had, blushing, done so, Margaret gave her the accolade that in her time meant so much. "Ay, you acted like true knight. Yet you need constant practice. Will see to it, come time".

The younger woman gushed: "Most willingly, Meg. I would be as skilled as you. Even though I be not an Echyngham" she added, archly. Everybody laughed.

Margaret chuckled: "A very proper spirit. Is't not so, gentlemen?"

"True enough" the men agreed.

Later, Braban went to his chamber, and the two women retired to bed; and although Ursula made a feeble attempt at play, she was so exhausted that they slept, Margaret drawing her head comfortably between her breasts. The last word that Ursula mumbled, as she drifted off were: "Meg, what a journey!". Margaret smiled, holding her close.

In the morn there was the pleasurable chore of receiving the items from the wagons. Everything was intact. The gold service made its owner's eyes sparkle. Then there was the silk, brocades, satins and velvet, and among the military items were swords of Spanish steel from Toledo, and sacks of coins, which Roger must have scooped up by the handful. Brought up in a world of violence, it hardly occurred to her to ask what terrible deeds had been done so that she could possess such wealth. Then there were the tapestries, so very fine. But it was the silk that mesmerised Ursula, laying her smooth cheek against it in unadulterated distaff delight.

"Ay, they are fine" Margaret admitted, her eyes twinkling, "and are staying here! Astonishing is it not my love, that it came originally from far Cathay?"

"Cathay!" Ursula mused, "they say a Venetian merchant named Marco Polo journeyed there in days long gone".

"This I have heard".

After midday the Echyngham men rode away, escorting Ursula and Braban. Margaret watched the bronze armour vanish into the distance and chuckled. It was not her business when Braban took ship back to Bayonne. If he was the man she thought him to be, he would take a few days furlough. Perverted though Ursula was as she herself was she realised sourly, much to her surprise it may be said, she would still take Braban, for decencies sake. Then Margaret snapped her fingers. She had not told Ursula she was enceinte. The plunder had quite driven it from her mind.

The year of 1378 was a nightmare to Margaret de Boxhull. Her mother had died in childbed and the thought brought a chill to her normally fearless spirit. But what was done, was done. The fact that Ursula, despite her extensive activity over Christmas, had escaped conception, irritated Lady Margaret considerably. For a time she was able to ride but the day came when she had to stop; and she was not happy. She snarled at Knelle, she snapped at Kate. They understood well enough. But she worked hard on estate matters, and wrote letters, which was painful enough in all conscience. Ursula came every week and it got so that the sight of her bronze armour among the trees was the only excitement she had. The last of the Ukkefelds was always gay and full of news. By now Margaret admitted to herself, quite without shame, that she was in love with Ursula; and Ursula rejoiced thereat. Ukkefeld had proved herself, Margaret thought proudly, she had courage. Properly channeled.....when her ordeal was over she would see to it. One day she might want military skill; one could almost smell disaffection in the air. But it was her skills in bed that charmed Meg so. Even in her present condition Margaret derived great comfort from Ursula's gossamer touch. She was quite wickedly enchanting, and her almost prehensile tongue drove Margaret to the edge of madness.

It was a splendid summer. Margaret had savoured the spring but she was missing the summer. And everything else that she held dear. Men came to pay their respects but seeing her swollen belly went away again, trying not to laugh at the great Margaret de Boxhull laid low by a woman's condition. This was the unkindest cut of all. Then there was the sickness. In the morning she was never out of the privy. She moaned to Kate: "It is always like this?"

"Usually, Lady Margaret".

"Manufacturing children is a nauseous business. Mark me, Kate. Leave it alone".

Kate laughed softly: "'Tis a woman's lot".

"Ay, 'tis easy for a man. He impregnates a lady and then..... is't not time you named me Meg, and not Lady Margaret? We are friends, are we not? It seems to me we have ridden into peril together, accounted as for war. And you have the most peerless blue eyes, Kate".

"Have I so, Margaret?". Cralle thanked her for her condescension. It was true, she thought, that the appetite grows by what it feeds on. Her cheeks dimpled and she blushed delightfully. Why was her heart beating so fast? If Meg was interested in her, she had always coveted that fine body. Echyngham blood called to Echyngham blood.

Margaret found great relief by walking the battlements. Her women warned her against exercise, but her instincts were sound. And she needed God's fresh air. Her muscles were getting flabby and this depressed her even more. The moment the child was free of her belly, she told herself, she would get back to condition as soon as possible. She missed the feel of a horse between her legs, and she was losing her tan, as she was informed. She had the pallor that she hated. Kate said it was vastly becoming, but what did the dear child know?

She was happiest in her armoury, among her weapons and harness. It became a refuge, a place of delight as she tended her equipment. She had never yet worn the armour Roger had given her, she thought gloomily. It was just at that moment that she had the first of many twinges, crying out at the suddenness of it. But Kate's supportive arm was speedily around her. Dear God, she thought, how terrible it is, being a lady.

Then came the laying in. Lady Isabel Cralle rode in, and so did Ursula. Margaret was surrounded by clucking ladies, an environment she hated. But there was no help for it. Ursula wiped her brow, while the other gentlewomen went to work. White haired Isabel Cralle had delivered more babies than she had hairs on her head, or so it seemed to her. And then it started.

Her men, gathered anxiously at the top of the stairs, heard her scream. Jim Attwood looked at his fellows and wiped the sweat from his face. "'Twould take a damned good man to wrest that yell from her with a sword".

Giles Ford glared at his comrade. "The man aint born who could make her cry out, and you know it, Jim Attwood. Dannel ye, she's got guts to burn".

"Why, so she has.....". Attwood's admission was cut short by a baby's cry. Bad humour gave way to relief. "Thank God, mates, 'tis all over. I'll go bail 'tis a boy. Sounds lusty enough. Good lungs".

It was a boy indeed. It was named Alan, according to Roger's commandment. Ursula penned a letter to the father in her neat, clerkly hand, informing him, with fulsome congratulation, of the arrival of his heir. A much weakened Lady Margaret inspected the bundle presented to her, and although proud of her achievement, her mother's instincts were minimal and the new life was handed to a wet nurse. Her men wished to file through her chamber to see the child, and present their gruff felicitations on a job well done, but this she declined to permit. Ursula raised an aristocratic eyebrow. "Nay, nay" Margaret explained weakly, "they have thought of me as their captain, their leader. Were they to see me as a lady, much enfeebled by the rigours of childbed....." Ursula got the point. "But you may display the child to my loyal fellows" and this white-haired Lady Cralle undertook to do. After two weeks she was out of bed, despite the wails of her women. In truth, motherhood suited her; she was radiant, blooming, but her thoughts were not with the child. She visited it every night out of duty but everyone knew where her thoughts were. She endured congratulations with a long-suffering smile. Three weeks after the birth she was in armour and four weeks after she was at practice on the greensward just beyond the drawbridge. Lady Cralle had heard the stories of course but was appalled by what she saw; but she could see that Margaret was happy again, as she came in with eyes a-dance, with perspiration on her brow, with a tilting helm in the crook of her arm.

Lady Cralle was something of a cross to Margaret but she endured it willingly enough, for a time. Isobel Cralle was seemingly strict in her moral standards but she loved children. She had raised a tribe of her own and sorely missed having children around her. She found Margaret's lack of interest strange (which it was) and her inclinations, both martial and sexual, detestable; as a consequence she had long since determined that her niece was no fit person to raise a child, which was certainly true. So that when the lady of Glottingham raised it one evening, she found no unresponsive subject.

"Dearest aunt" murmured Meg in her softly modulated contralto, "would it not please you to take the child and care for him at Warbleton?"

Lady Cralle looked up from her embroidery. "It appears that you prefer my room to my company".

"Nay, but aunt.....".

"I see well that you have no interest in the fruit of your belly" the dowager went on severely. "What are your plans for the boy?"

"Why, the customary one, dearest aunt. When he is old enough he will be placed in some lord's house to learn the duties of his rank. What else?"

"What else indeed. I see you at least know your duty. Until that time I will remove that which hinders your.....pleasures".

Meg coloured slightly but bowed her dark, glossy head under the reproof. "'Tis true, aunt, that my manner of life conflicts with.....".

"Indeed, child". A half smile played around the old lady's lips, "I was myself young once". And for the next hour the younger woman had to endure reminiscences of the Court of Edward III, not forgetting that king's visit to Echyngham. It was a small price to pay, and Meg listened with a charming smile, as her aunt related her own youthful adventures, and wild they were. It seemed that gallantry ran in the family.

The next day was Ursula's weekly visit and both of them drank more than was perhaps wise, considering Isabel Cralle's presence. Tongues were loosened, and the conversation became lewder by the minute. Within two hours Lady Cralle was on her way to Warbleton with the child. Margaret was free and Ursula, her speech still slurred, giggled: "'Tis good, Meg, is't not?". Meg had to agree that it was, and hand in hand they almost ran to her chamber.

The life at the castle settled back into its pleasurable round. Few were the days when the chatelaine was not in the saddle, imposing her will with a heavy hand. During her incapacity things had got mighty lax, and she set about reducing all to conformity. It was the lady's unshakeable belief that goodness did not work; only force; mildness, she was wont to say, leads to abuses. These were the rules she lived by.

Thus, when some Pelham retainers, in their road from Battle, had turned aside to Brightling and there had raped some women and killed some men who had protested thereat, her wrath was terrible. Funtridge in that parish was a Boxhull manor and in those days men looked to the lord of the manor for law enforcement. It so happened that she was fully armed, ready to ride to Ursula's when a bleeding peasant brought her the news. She told the man to have his hurts seen to, and then, slamming her visor shut, she led thirty of her men in a thundering torrent over the drawbridge. Knelle had seen the bleakness of her eyes and expected no less than swift and bloody retribution. The peasant had said the Pelham men had been "evilly drunk". Even so, it was no excuse. They caught up with the malefactors near the village of Dallington at the place now known as Carrick's Hill, and hit them like a cyclone. The squire, whom she met in mortal contention, was in his cups but sober enough to put up a spirited defence, giving her much trouble. But in the end she cut him down, where he joined his men in death. She eyed the human wreckage with grim satisfaction and flicked blood from her blade before handing it to Knelle to clean in the grass. It was a common enough occurrence in her time and everyone applauded her swift justice. As Roger's representative she was well aware of her right to make private war and leaving the dead where they had fallen, rode to High Ridge without hesitation. On hearing of it, Ursula clapped her hands delightedly: "Would that I had been there, Meg".

"Would that you had". Meg treated her as an equal in arms, having worked hard on her training, imparting her not inconsiderable military skills. In the early stages she had knocked her friend down several times but the day came when Ursula laid her, dazed, on the greensward. Lest she be thought partial to her lover, she quizzed John Knelle, who agreed with her as to the Ukkefeld abilities.

"A bonny little fighter, Lady Margaret, strong and game. She wilts not, is compact and agile. Has learned much of late, ducks well in combat. Has made you miss a fair number of times, beside laying you on your back. In a tight corner she would acquit herself nobly. Nimble on her feet too. In a fight would ask nothing more than to have she on my left and yourself on my right".

It was a gallant speech and Margaret smiled broadly: "Take care you trip not over your tongue, John. I feared I was being over-kind".

"Not so, she is a brave lady".

It was about this time that Margaret received her first direct intimation of undercurrents of discontent. It came in the form

of a letter from Elizabeth. Her man, Henry Busbridge brought it on one of his twice yearly visits to Echyngham. Margaret stared at her sister's armorial seal before opening it. Passing Busbridge on to Knelle for entertainment, she sat down to read it. Elizabeth wrote beautifully, like a clerk, but she had a crabbed quill and got an astonishing amount onto the parchment. It was always largely Court gossip, but at the end was a cryptic message: "Look to your defences, sister. I smell trouble a-brewing". Now, Elizabeth was blessed with a very acute sense of smell, and Margaret believed her. She, too, had received a whiff of it. Bess was in London and kept her ear very close to the ground, having contacts among the merchants in the City. Meg penned a laborious reply, telling her sister to rest easy and not to worry. She saw to it that Glottingham was as near impregnable as possible.

It was not until the summer of 1379 that she was walking the battlements with Knelle late one night - she had admitted him to her bed in the April - that they saw lights deep in the woods where no light should have been.

"I like not that" Knelle muttered, "nay, that likes me not". He liked it even less when faintly on the night air came the sound of hammer on metal.

"Arms being forged, think you?".

The lady was phlegmatic. "Doubtless".

"Could take some men.....".

"And get your throat cut. Nay, let be. Not my land". It was too far over to be Boxhull land. "The Manor of Rothersbridge belike".

Then in the autumn she picked up a man without a paper to travel. Said he was a forgerman, seeking work. Could have been true. Itinerant forgermen were not rare. But she put him in a dungeon to frighten him a little. She never used torture, being far from cruel; besides, her father told her it was counter-productive. Nonetheless she put on a show of strength, keeping the implied threat of torture in the background. He was a poor fellow enough, and spilled what he knew, confirming the rumours of a widespread conspiracy. After pumping him dry, she kicked him over the drawbridge. "If I find you on my land by morning, will have you flogged till the blood runs down to your heels" was her parting message as he scampered off.

She turned to a grinning Knelle: "What think you of that, John?".

"That Lady Elizabeth was in the right of it".

"She usually is".

"Must therefore be vigilant".

At Christmas she gave the usual banquet in the great hall, over which she presided like a Viking chieftain. She smiled as the men tossed goose bones to the hounds, who, like wise animals, hogged the central fire. Outside in the courtyard an ox was roasted for the peasants, and ale flowed like wine did in the great hall. But it was not simple generosity. Men-at-arms mingled with the peasants, gleaning with their ears as the saying was. The only feedback from this exercise was: "Haswell swears he'll wring her neck".

"Haswell" she mused, "know you him?".

"The smith at Salehurst. An ox of a man".

"Ah! Not my land. Whose neck does he hope to wring, think you?".

Knelle grinned: "Could be your ladyship's. Or Mistress Ursula's. Haswell's daughter served her, and she had her publicly flogged for stealing a silver comb, as I hear tell".

"Would take a good man".

"Haswell be a good man".

"Hmm!".

This was not the only source of information Margaret had. There was Tom Merrieweather. There were no serfs on Boxhull estates. Roger had insisted on it, a piece of foolishness she found it hard to credit. Elizabeth still had serfs, so did Ursula. Yet Margaret had to admit that it had its uses. Merrieweather frequented 'The Tun' in Munfield village. He was not trusted, being the kind known as 'a lord's man'. Nonetheless, occasionally he overheard something he was not meant to overhear and it was duly passed on, to his financial benefit. Margaret had no qualms about employing a spy; it was a common practice among the ruling class to maintain their power.

In 1380 she received two letters from Sir Roger, which was very remarkable, for he, like herself, was better with a sword than a quill. One letter from Calais told her he was about to leave on a raid into France under the banner of Thomas of Woodstock, Earl of Buckingham. Then in November comes a letter from Brittany saying that he hoped to return home in time for Christmas to see his son. Well, Margaret thought, it is about time, and she made her arrangements accordingly. But December brought the worst gales men could remember and though at Christmas festivities a place was set for him, he did not appear. So she reigned in state by herself. And then, just before Twelfth Night's end he rode in with Braban. As things turned out it was fortuitous but Margaret, after so much freedom, found it hard, dooms hard.

She was just thinking about it all when Roger came back into the chamber, whistling beneath his breath. He bent to pick up her embroidery.

"You like that tapestry, wife?".

"Which tapestry?".

"The one I left you staring at, and the one you still stare at".

She laughed ruefully. "Nay, the tapestry is good, husband. But I was in a reverie. Thinking of the past, of my father, of Bess, of Bayonne and Bennet Haselden. Has been a good life".

"Why, so it has, wife. What then?".

"Thinking about what the priest said. Might be ending".

Grinning, he ruffled her hair: "Thought the Echyngham wenches feared nought".

"True. We were so raised. But it seems serious".

"Mayhap. Yet are you not the lady who marched half over France to meet me, encased in steel from top to toe? It may not be that she wilts before a pack of disaffected rebels".

She had to laugh. "Ay, you are right. I am as a child affrighted by shadows".

"So come to bed, wife. 'Tis late. And I have to ride to Hastings come the morn. Must see John Halle. Did I not say it?".

"Ay, you said it. And I am a fool truly". She meshed her fingers with his. "I must be growing old". And laughing they walked towards the inner chamber.

Elizabeth de Echyngham paced her chamber with ill-concealed distress of mind. For the past week it had been so. Jane Alard, busy with her needle, looked up with mouse-like timidity, not venturing a question. Elizabeth stopped briefly to prod the tiled floor with her foot before proceeding with her perambulation. She was worried and very ill at ease.

The two women were strikingly dissimilar. Both were dark-haired and of similar build, but it was in their natures that the difference lay. Elizabeth was a tall, strong woman with an arresting face, one could not truly say beautiful. Arresting, ay, that was the word. Jane was only slightly smaller, about the size of the Lady Margaret, with a smooth, oval face. She had been raised by the Benedictine nuns of Malling, Kent, and her attitude to life was a consequence of this training. Elizabeth had known no such upbringing; she was a woman of the world, trained in the duties of a woman of her class. Sophisticated she was, without any illusions. Thus, she loved the mouse who shared her life, principally because in Alard she saw what she might have been, a pure and uncorroded daughter of God.

It was silent in the house, except for a distant guffaw from a male throat. Elizabeth's nose wrinkled. Some doubtful jest, some piece of masculine filth. Not that she was squeamish. Even now she had returned from a bed not her own, and didn't give a damn. She had drunk deep of wine and had submitted to the man's attentions with abandon, glorying in her abasement. Now, in the small hours she felt the burden of her twenty-four years and had returned to the doubts that had assailed her for days.

Elizabeth de Echyngham smelt danger as she smelt an offensive odour - and with equal distaste. She glanced at the guttering torch on the wall, frowning. Her keen mind was susceptible to every undercurrent of discontent, and for weeks a vague feeling of ill-ease had been evolving in her mind. This was the product of her father's training. Like other ladies of her class, she flirted and, if so minded, savoured the illicit fruits of love. Why not? She was rich, bored and, as she told herself with a shrug of elegant shoulders, what else was there to do at Court? Despite all this, even while engaged in these delicious pursuits, her mind registered the gradual increase of hostility in the eyes of the people.

Outside in the Strand, all was quiet. It was four in the morning. The peasants were asleep on their dirty straw. Soon, to the east, the city would awake, crawling with ant-like humanity. Elizabeth's lips twitched in sardonic humour. Ay, the rats would crawl forth from their holes to face another day, spitting curses against her kind. Hostility was one thing. This was a normal consequence of the flaunting of inordinate wealth in the faces of the poor. It was a normal reaction. But she had detected something deeper, something more sinister. There were tales of an organisation of the oppressed, widespread and strong. This frightened her, for her trained mind knew that the peasants could pull her kind down from their high places, had they but the wit to organise themselves behind a leader. And the minority that ruled the majority would die - men, women and children - in a holocaust of blood and savagery.

She had no wish to die at this juncture. Looking down at her yellow gown, she reflected on its inadequacy to turn aside a sword thrust, much less an arrow. She frowned. Looking at the timber construction of her house, she knew

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it would burn like a torch, if trouble came. Elizabeth thought of her stone manor house in Sussex, and typically made a snap decision.

"Jane" she announced, "we are going home".

The young woman's eyes brightened, as she smiled up at her friend. Jane had been a sore trial to Elizabeth. She was as timid and good as her mentor was courageous and gallant. Dutifully Alard closed her ears to the tales of Bess's adventures, yet she knew, deep down, what Elizabeth was and paradoxically admired her for it. Sin, she told herself, was very attractive.

"I shall see Winchelsea again" she murmured, dreamily.

"Ay, if you live long enough". Alard's head jerked up, startled. "Ah, yes, we are fleeing from the wrath to come, dear mouse". Elizabeth was as grim as any of her race in face of danger.

"There is danger?"

"Have you not heard?"

"Have heard rumours.....".

"Rumours have roots in fact".

"But any rebellion will be put down" was the sublime reply. "The king.....".

"The king is but a boy". There was silence. "Moreover, the people are incensed, and with justice if we speak the truth. You know I despise the peasant, Jane, but it is not policy to push them too far".

"And they are being pushed too far?"

Elizabeth opened her eyes wide. "Where have you been hiding yourself? You know well that John of Gaunt and his friends on the King's council have bled England white, building their fortunes out of human misery.....the purse proud fools. There should be moderation in all things".

"This is treasonable talk!"

"The truth often is. Would you denounce me?"

"You speak foolishly".

"Do I so? Then hear more foolishly spoken words, my innocent one. I spoke of moderation. These men are rapacious. This new poll-tax now. Three groats, or three great pennies as the people call them. This will be the last straw, the act that will push the peasants into open rebellion. We are of the nobility, but can you not understand the peasants mind? It is stealing the bread from his wife and brood to line the pockets of those already rich; so that the nobles can adorn their whores with jewels and furs".

"As you are adorned by Sir Simon Burley?"

The jibe struck home. When Burley was in England, she was his acknowledged and regular mistress. But now he was in Bohemia on embassy and she was free to market her charms as she pleased. Elizabeth flushed scarlet, stepping forward angrily. Then she stopped, laughing without humour.

"Ay, you are right, by the Mass! 'Tis what I am indeed".

She turned from her in self-contempt, as if in fear that her proximity would taint that pure soul. "It matters not. I have made my bed long since. All this is beside the point. I return to what I said before. We are going home". Then,

savagely, she snapped: "Go, don your armour and send Henry Busbridge to me".

"Oh, Bess" wailed Alard, "must I indeed? 'Tis so heavy".

"Nonsense. If I can carry it, so can you".

"You are stronger than I. And you are used to it. It stifles me".

"Better to be stifled than die".

"But Bess.....".

Elizabeth was not prepared to discuss it. "Do as I say, Jane". She was inflexible. "I will come and aid you presently".

Jane went from her, and soon Henry Busbridge stood before her, wondering in his mind as to the cause of this early summons. He was a tall man, darkly bearded, broad of shoulder. Elizabeth eyed him appreciatively, smiling, pointing to the chair vacated by Alard.

"We ride for Echyngham come dawn, Henry".

Busbridge sensed that something was amiss, and did not doubt the reason. She was not like other women, as he well knew. She had inner toughness. Her mind was a man's; never had he thought of her as a frivolous woman. You could talk to her intelligently of matters other than bed.

"Have heard the rumours, Lady Elizabeth?"

"Have not you?"

"A serious matter certainly". He tugged at his beard, absently. "Think you the people will rise?"

"'Tis certain".

He nodded agreement. "So I think. So we ride. When?"

"As soon as may be".

"Dawn at the latest?"

"As you say. Immediately the bridge is open".

"Who rides with us?"

"The men alone. No women. Pay them what is owing to them, and send them packing. Mistress Alard will ride with us of course, but for the rest I only want the men-at-arms".

"And the household stuff?"

"Leave it. Pack only essentials, the plate and ought else of value".

"And your ladyship's finery?"

She laughed. "That is not essential, Henry. I am happier in steel, as you know".

"And Alard? She will wear harness, I trust".

"She would be ill-advised to wear silk" Elizabeth commented drily. "I will see to it. Now, about your business, Henry. You have two hours".

He saluted and withdrew. Elizabeth sat musing for a while. The grey light of dawn stole into the chamber, reminding her that time was passing. Rising, she went to Alard, as she had promised.

Jane had dutifully divested herself of her gown and donned mail. At the sight of Elizabeth she blushed, embarrassed by her attire.

"It is a sin to wear the dress of men" she murmured, "'tis so laid down by Holy Church".

Elizabeth, who treated the dictates of the Church very cavalierly, chuckled: "Just so, but these are rules for the right governance of the laity during normal times. There are exceptions to every rule".

"You find exceptions mighty easily, Bess".

"If you feel strongly on the matter, confess it to the priest. For myself, I consider harness a necessity. I tell you true, without it you ride not with me. A gown is no protection against a clothyard arrow".

"No one would shoot a lady".

"You are strangely misinformed" retorted Elizabeth coolly. "Rebels and outlaws would not think twice about it, nor would the lice that infest our roads. As gentry, we are the prey. You may praise the Saints that you have such a fine protection. If we rode south in a gown, would not give a groat for our chances of seeing Echyngham, no matter for Winchelsea".

While she spoke she had been expertly buckling on the plate which supplemented the mail and soon, despite her reluctance, Alard stood in the knightly habiliments of the period. It had cost a fortune, money that would have fed a poor man for many moons; it was a prime example of the armourer's art that made Milan famous. Elizabeth buckled on the spurs and, rising, surveyed the girl critically, then with approval. Only the bascinet, with its hinged visor and mail aventail remained.

"Ay" she nodded, "a fine harness and one which will turn aside a shrewd blow or any shaft drawn, were it Robin Hood himself. Is it not so?"

Alard looked down at herself with the first stirrings of pride. It was a strange, warming feeling. Blazoned on the white jupon were the arms of her family - the famous three lozenges, borne with such honour in the past - and she tapped them absently, smooth brow ridged by a frown of disapproval. It was a disturbing feeling, this knowledge of her caste, and the arrogance of spirit. Finding Elizabeth's eyes on her, amused but tolerant, she turned crimson to the very roots of her hair. It had been a brief glimpse but Elizabeth had seen and understood.

"Come" she laughed, "you must do as much for me".

She took less time over her transformation and made considerably less fuss than had Jane. She was used to steel and had she spoken the truth she would have admitted that dragging about in a gown was not to her taste. She had learned the freedom of masculine attire very early and preferred it to the dress imposed by her sex. It had always been so. Thus it was both for herself and for Margaret. They were Amazons and knew it. It was a much happier lady who felt once more a sword at her side, a weapon she knew so well how to wield with strength and assurance. She laughed aloud at the unrestricted movement of her legs and felt considerable more secure than she had for many days past, seeing the hatred in the eyes of the people.

"Now" she laughed, slapping her thigh, "we have a chance, by the Mass! Go fetch Henry Busbridge to me".

Jane did as she was bid, her steel shod feet echoing on the stairs. Drawing on her gauntlets, Elizabeth eyed the

gilt latten with satisfaction. Hearing her squire approach, she turned.

"All ready, Henry?"

"All ready" replied that laconic individual, smiling grimly. "I yearn for the road as I doubt not does your ladyship".

"You say truth, Henry". Picking up her bascinet, she allowed him to place it on her head and adjust the aventail on her shoulders. Deftly he tightened some straps, clucking disapprovingly as he did so. Elizabeth stood passively; it was his function. She threw a glance of mock reproach at Jane who shrugged delicately with a chink of steel. When all was secure, she thanked him with a nod. "The sooner we are out of this hornet's nest the better. Come Jane".

Busbridge followed her, grinning. He well remembered the tiltyard at Echyngham in days of yore when her father had taught her and her sister the arts of war. She had been treated as a son, no mitigation for her sex. He well recalled the men-at-arms - rough, battle-hardened fellows from the French wars - go down before her. She rode like a man, fought like a man and had a wrist of steel. Being a man he adored her; his cock often swelled for her; she knew it and laughed gaily. The men had already formed up, surrounding the pack-horses. Elizabeth swung herself into the saddle like a man; Alard needed help. Busbridge rode immediately behind his mistress, while Jane's man, Richard Jordan, did likewise with her.

Elizabeth gazed regretfully at her house and sighed. Despite being country-bred, she loved London, with its stench and colour; but for the discontent which troubled her mind she would have been happy to stay. Before closing her visor she glanced sourly at John of Gaunt's palace of the Savoy. It was here that she had first met Sir Simon Burley, his hot eyes tearing the gown from her body. Her lips twitched at the memory of that first adventure in the chamber in Gaunt's palace. Her eyes swept over the immense pile, the stone walls, the huge gateway that led onto the Strand, muddy and rutted in winter, thick with dust now it was summer. She knew the house well. How often had she been borne through the gateway? A hundred times? Nay, more. She remembered its layout. As you entered, the chapel was on your right, the great hall where the Duke feasted in front of you. She remembered those feasts, how Gaunt would sit with the Swynford woman, and her lip curled. Then, after the feast, it was wenching time, when a lady made a token resistance before falling gracefully.

The well-lit road to sin lay behind and above the great hall to the private apartments. Elizabeth remembered the high laughter, the wild, giddy talk that preceded defloration; briefly a hot tide of shame swept over her and she was grateful that no man could see her face. Best think of other things, she told herself, of the gardens that sloped down to the Thames, large and beautiful. Even here memory would not down. She remembered hot summer evenings and the delighted squeals of ladies pursued by virile love through the orchards, while the Duke and his whore looked benevolently on. Then, in her mind's eye, she saw the watergate where she stepped ashore from her barge, in what Busbridge called her finery, her gown and her furs and her jewels, ready for another night of sinful dalliance.

Her memory raced back to that night in February 1377 when the people had stormed the Palace seeking to hang the Duke and burn the house. While Courtenay, the Bishop of London, supped in the Great Hall, she was supping more deliciously elsewhere in the Palace. Then came the tumult, and while the Bishop went to the gate to face the mob, half-dressed ladies, with capes hastily thrown about ivory shoulders, fled through the gardens to their barges, teeth chattering from fear and the bite of that February night. She had been one terrified lady.

Elizabeth came back to the present with a jolt, as a neigh from a horse slashed through her reverie. She smiled at Jane, successfully trying to control her mount. She was a good rider and handled it well. She gave the order to start.

They passed through the city without mishap, receiving but cursory glances. Once a powerful fellow, a waterman, spat as they passed, a gesture of contempt. Busbridge snapped an oath. Elizabeth turned, ripping out an order: "Leave it!". She knew class hatred when she saw it. They passed on peacefully. Such cavalcades were common enough sights in those days, but Elizabeth was ever vigilant, ready for trouble.

Passing St. Paul's, they reached London Bridge by way of Eastcheap. It was already thronged with people, the shops that lined this, London's only bridge, doing good business. They passed other travellers coming in from the countryside, pedlars with their packs, palmers, friars and even a rich ecclesiastic, his horse superbly caparisoned. Seeing her arms, he bowed. Elizabeth knew him and named him to herself as William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester. He had briefly held the living of Brightling, a Prebendal manor of the College of St. Mary in the Castle at Hastings, in Sussex, abutting on Boxhull land and he knew the family of Echyngnam well. Doubtless on his way to the Court from Winchester House on the Surrey side.

It was then that Elizabeth swore. The drawbridge, spanning the river at the thirteenth arch, had been raised to allow a ship to pass. They had perforce to wait. She fumed at the delay but could do nothing. Sitting quietly, she watched the people through the slits in her visor.

In turn the party received the stares of the populace. Women were curious, the men vaguely hostile, a fact not lost on Elizabeth. Jane, for her part, looked around with interest, but this was nearly their undoing. A lusty fellow in a green jerkin brushed against her charger. Being a mettle beast, of nervous disposition, it reared, scattering people nearby. The man clawed at Alard's leg to save himself. She cried out in outrage.

Before Richard Jordan could move to her aid, Alard reacted in the way she had been taught to react when touched by a member of the lower orders. It was not a conscious decision of the intellect, but instinct pure and simple. She struck out. Normally her fist would have caused no man to quail but encased in steel, and given the added strength of fear and anger, it opened the fellow's face from ear to jaw. He screamed, reeling back.

Elizabeth saw the blood spurt from his face and glanced at the drawbridge. It was lowering. She ordered her

troop to close up so that it would not be split by an attack which, as she rightly saw, was close to happening. Around them people swore openly; men approached purposefully, staffs in hand. Women screamed, and behind her Elizabeth heard Busbridge roar an oath. Alard, incredibly, reached for her sword. It was an event so unlooked for that Elizabeth sat staring open-mouthed. Menacingly the crowd pressed closer; the bridge was down at last and Elizabeth reared her horse, sending the people stumbling, cursing, from its hooves. She dived for Jane's bridle and, followed by the men, galloped madly over the bridge, creating havoc as they went. A staff crashed on her shoulders harmlessly; behind them the howl of the mob grew fainter.

Nobody drew rein until they reached the Priory of St. Mary Overy, and even then Elizabeth did not speak but pressed on after waiting for the men to form up in orderly fashion behind her. They passed the Marshalsea prison where Richard Ingham was Governor and thus into the open country.

Bess could not find it in her heart to be angry with Jane. In similar circumstance she would probably have done the same. Yet it had been an unpleasant moment and considering the feelings of the people, a dangerous one. She was not a little astonished that the timid mouse had shown such spirit.

Alard, for her part, was appalled at her action. What, she asked herself, would the good nuns of Malling, who raised her, think of this instinctive resort to force. Had they not taught her to turn the other cheek and that the meek should inherit the earth? So she had always comported herself but now, at the first sign of physical danger, she had smitten a man to earth, causing him hurt. She had seen the streaming blood and instead of horror had felt only satisfaction. She had always smugly assumed that she was a better woman than Bess, but was this indeed so?

Richard Jordan looked sideways at Henry Busbridge, grinning. For him the experience had been joyous, for man-like, he admired a wench of spirit. Mistress Alard's goodness, he reflected, had never been in question, but as her follower he had always deplored her timidity in a world that was, by nature, violent. Now here was the Alard blood in full command, as evidenced by the full-blooded blow he had witnessed.

Elizabeth turned to her at last, speaking in French, so that the men might not enjoy her banter: "So you scratch, do you, kitten?".

Alard sighed. "You are laughing at me, Bess".

"Nay, I do not laugh". She was serious. "It was bravely done, by the Mass! I did not think my mouse would strike at all, leave aside such a famous blow".

"I was afeared. I thought he meant me ill".

Elizabeth chuckled. "I saw that well, I stand proud of you, Jane. 'Tis certain sure you are a true lady of coat armour and do not disgrace your arms".

Jane flushed at the compliment. Like all timid people, prompted by fear into a courageous action, she was inordinately proud of what she had done. Elizabeth guessed all this and smiled tolerantly, knowing how heady a wine is the first passage of arms.

She turned in the saddle and motioned to Busbridge who pushed his horse alongside her.

"Henry, we had best break our journey at Tonbridge. Mistress Alard is unused to the weight of armour. I have no wish to tire her. You, Master Jordan and the men can find entertainment at the castle. On sight of the arms of Echyngham they will not turn you away. Jane and I will lodge with my uncle in the town". The man nodded. "I wish to start in the morning, so soon as the gates are open. I have it in mind to reach Echyngham by midday. It is understood?"

"Ay. You wish that we should call for you at your lodging?"

"That will be best".

He saluted and withdrew. They rode on in tight formation as a defence against sudden attack. The rutted track ran on through everlasting woods, with occasional clearings. Here they passed peasants tending their pigs. Elizabeth nodded to them, raising a hand in acknowledgement of their obeisance. But she was not deceived. Watching their eyes, she saw hatred all around her. Beneath such silent enmity, her normally gay spirit sank. Now she knew what it must be like to march through hostile country, as her warrior father had often told her. Then they came to Bromley, passing the great house of the Bishops of Rochester. Then up to the higher land beyond. It was a part of the way that Elizabeth feared, for it had an awesome reputation. Habitations were few and far between. Beyond Bromley a few miserable hovels surrounded a church at Farnborough; from then on until they reached Sevenoaks the road was desolate and Elizabeth, for all her courage, felt great unease. They toiled slowly up the great hill that men called Nockholt, baking in their armour, for the sun was hot. Anyone who attacked us now, Bess told herself, could sweep us before them like chaff. Nothing untoward happened and she breathed a sigh of heart-felt relief when they dropped down into the valley, where the ancient road from Winchester to Canterbury crossed their path. Here a party of pilgrims, blithely singing, passed on their way to St. Thomas's jewel-bedecked shrine at Canterbury. From here the Archbishop of Canterbury's manor house at Otford was but a short step to the east. Elizabeth led her troop up the long, weary ascent to Sevenoaks, the market town that crowned the ridge.

The descent out of the town was steep and dangerous but Elizabeth was the happier because Tonbridge, a moated town of considerable strength, was not far away, little more than two leagues. They climbed another hill, then descended to the valley and could see in the distance the water around the town gleaming in the sunshine, and the bulk of the castle rising from amid red roofs. As they grew closer they could see the glint of sun on steel, indicating that the walls of town and castle were lined with armed men.

"Do they then" exclaimed an astonished Jane Alard, "expect the French to sail up the Medway?"

Elizabeth laughed throatily. "Rebellion is in the air. The men of Tonbridge are doubtless right to take what precautions they may". Jane was an innocent, she thought to herself. Margaret would have understood; and she thanked God that she had unburdened herself to her sister. She would be well prepared, would Meg, armed at all points.

Within the hour they were clattering over the uneven, cobbled streets. Passing through the gateway of the castle Elizabeth demanded, and obtained, lodging for her men. Then, accompanied only by Henry Busbridge and Richard Jordan, the two ladies rode on into the town to find the shop of her kinsman. The apprentices gaped as the party drew rein at the door, staring more incredulously as the two ladies swung themselves stiffly to earth, leaving the horses in the charge of the two squires. The men saluted before returning to the castle with the horses.

Elizabeth raised her visor, greeting the apprentices by name. Anthony Crispe, the kinsman in question, came out to meet them with many expressions of welcome. He was a grizzled man, not yet fifty; he ushered them into his house, eyeing with the utmost concern the dust on his visitors. But he said nothing, not even when Alard slapped her jupon, sending a cloud of white Kentish dust over the room.

They were shown to the best room in the house and having divested themselves of harness, ate their fill of carp washed down with Gascony wine; after this they retired to bed to sleep deeply, weary from their exertions.

The first rays of the sun awoke Elizabeth the next morning, blinking in the light. She woke a protesting Jane, who tried to turn over and go to sleep again; but Elizabeth was implacable. Within the hour they were ready again for the road, and after a frugal breakfast they waited around for their men. With bulging eyes the apprentices looked upon them with wonderment, so much so that Crispe had to sharply remind them to take down the shutters of the shop. He would take no money from his kinswoman for her entertainment but was plainly glad to see her go.

As they rode off, he bowed to them from the door with a hundred courtesies, then returned to the more important business of trade.

"Cousin Anthony" Elizabeth explained, "is not of the main line, but he is a good man".

"He keeps a good cellar".

"Ay, he likes the good things of life, does cousin Anthony. And why not? He is a wealthy man, and wifeless".

At the town's end they closed their visors and prepared to face the loneliness of the Hastings road. Elizabeth had it in mind to reach Echyngham by the sun's zenith and they did not spare their fresh mounts. It was a desolate road, with no village athwart it for two leagues. Being a realist, she knew very well the dangers and condescended to educate her companion.

"Between here and Echyngham it is all forest, Jane. 'Tis infested with outlaws, like much of our poor land. Woe to the land whose king is a child! The leader of these rogues is one Richard of Bellhurst. He has as his woman Emma de Berewyck. Both are mortal enemies to the house of Echyngham and all who serve them or ride with them. It behoves us therefore to have a care".

"Whence comes this hate?"

Before replying, Elizabeth thought for some minutes. "It all happened when I was very young. I know not the truth of the matter. There was quarrels. Bellhurst was a fair house and my father burned it over this Richard's head,

On her feet again, Elizabeth drew her sword and plunged into the affray. Alard still sat her horse, hacking at her attackers. It crossed Elizabeth's mind, briefly, that she might be worth training, come time. On the right and left of her, Busbridge and her own man, Richard Jordan, fought stolidly. The Echyngham sword made savage inroads into the outlaw force, like a shaft of quicksilver, darting first here, first there; a big fellow loomed up before her, and fell back, bellowing, clutching his guts. She fought like she enjoyed it, which she did. Then, quite suddenly, it was over. The outlaws fled up the banks, disappearing into the woods to nurse their hurts, and only the screams of the dying remained. These were speedily despatched.

Elizabeth regained her charger without help, swinging into the saddle with a grind of steel. She saw Jane's sword dripped blood, and said warmly: "You bear your arms valiantly". Then to Busbridge: "Our losses?".

"Three" came the laconic response. "Two of our men, one of Mistress Jane's. A few bruises, otherwise we are scathless". Then he bethought him. "Unless you be hurt, Lady Elizabeth".

"I am well enough. More hurt in pride than body". She hardly glanced at the body strewn road. "Tie our men to their horses and let us on".

While the order was being carried out, she eased her horse closer to Jane, asking how she did.

"I am not hurt, if that be your quest" came the quiet reply, as she slammed her sword into the scabbard, "but I feared for your life, Bess".

Grimly, Elizabeth nodded: "Like enough, my life hung by a thread indeed. You now understand my words about wearing harness?".

"You were right, Bess, and I was a fool".

Busbridge approached them, saluting. He jerked a mailed thumb behind him. "And the Berewyck woman?".

Elizabeth's voice was hard as a man's: "Let her rot where she lies. A wolfs-head! A meal for the crows, Been gallows ripe these many years. Saw you her man, Bellhurst?".

"Saw him not. Could scarce have missed him. A man hewn out of rock".

They moved off in good order. Elizabeth knew that one of her enemies lay dead, and also knew that the death of his woman would but sharpen Bellhurst's hatred of her. With her ingrained toughness of mind, she relegated Bellhurst to the future. She knew well enough that they would meet one day, his men and hers, and one of them would have to die, but it was not in her nature to worry about fate.

Coming to a four-went way, the woods receded, giving way to open heath for about half a league. Jane asked how close they were to Echyngham. Tersely: "Half a league, no more".

The woods pressed in again, the pocked and pitted track narrow and twisting. A track joined the road from the left, partly obscured by undergrowth, and in a short while the road divided again. Without hesitation Elizabeth took the right hand fork across a small green that temporarily pushed back the trees. A few miserable huts lined the road

driving him into the forest. Since when he has waged war on all my house. And Emma de Berewyck?"

"Her man, Simon, owed Sir William much money, reaped silver and the like. My father sought his due, begging them to the door. The man died through very shame, as 'tis said, and the woman fled to the greenwood, having nowhere else to go; in sooth, it was a pity for she was a comely wench, 'tis said. This Richard took her as his woman. Between them they terrorise this land. Comes happier times, I must see, an end of them. They are wicked people".

Alard said nothing but thought the more.

Like dark walls the woods pressed close to the road, running on league after league as it seemed. It was much ridged and rutted and the horses picked their way carefully. Only one village lay athwart the road. They clattered through Lamberhurst, bringing women to the doors of humble cots to note their passing.

On the southern side of the village was a wayside cross of weathered stone; the road narrowed here, so that only two riders could pass together. In the summer sun the earth was as hard as iron, despite the woods that overhung the road, shutting out the light. It was here that the ever-watchful Elizabeth, good captain as she was, saw a glint of steel and uttered a warning cry that echoed in the cathedral-like dome of trees.

Steel-capped men lined the banks above the road, bows drawn to the ear with deadly purpose. In fear Elizabeth beth whispered: "St. Mary be my shield!". Jane, strangely calm, saw, and profiting by Elizabeth's instruction, bent her head to meet the iron-tipped messengers of death. There was the sound as of many bees and the shafts smashed home. One struck Elizabeth on the forehead, just above the eye vents, forcing her back. Her horse reared and with a scream that was muffled in her helmet, she rolled in the dust.

"The whore is down!". A shrill, jubilant cry echoed above the shouts of the men. Then the narrow, rutted track was full of the clash of steel and roars of desperate men.

The arms of Echyngham still lay in the dust, their wearers stunned. Then one stood above the prostrate form, sword upraised. With shock Elizabeth, head clearing, saw it was not a man, and she recognised Emma de Berewyck's malice contorted face beneath the steel cap, yellowing teeth bared in a snarl. Almost curiously the gentlewoman stared up at her enemy, noting the well-muscled, massive arms. The sword fell, glancing from the bascinet as Elizabeth automatically jerked her head. Still winded from her fall, but with all the alarm bells ringing in her head, Elizabeth circled steel arms around the outlaw's hips, crushing her. Screeching, she went down heavily, the steel cap rolling from her head, revealing thinning, greying hair.

Elizabeth's hand dropped to her misericord, as they rolled in the road; her eyes were bleak, pitiless. It was kill or be killed, a fight for life. The outlaw's head flopped backward into a rut. Staring down into the terror-filled eyes, Elizabeth laughed harshly. The dagger rose and fell; the body jerked in death, the eyes glazed, lifeless jelly in a white face. As the blade was withdrawn, blood gushed from the slack mouth.

but they seemed deserted. The road started to down through woodland that again surrounded them. Then ahead they saw the blue sky that heralded the forest's end.

When the sun was high in the heavens they started to descend the final hill into Echyngham. Elizabeth held up her hand, bringing all to a halt. She gazed at the sunlit scene with an almost breathless happiness, even as one dreading lest the vision vanish. The grey stone walls of her manorhouse, with the parish church just peering over the battlements, called to her insistently. It had been so long. A fair inheritance, yet she had abandoned it to seek her own pleasures. She sighed, half in self-condemnation, half in pleasure.

Then she spied the cattle in the fields and the cots. Suddenly the day became less fair. Things were not as she had remembered them, five years since, and she frowned. The thatch on many of the cots was thin and holed, open to wind and rain. Jane looked at her friend, then back to the village with puzzlement. The steward's reports had been glowing, and while Elizabeth had absented herself for so long, no hint had reached them of such conditions.

"Henry.....Henry Busbridge". The words were a whiplash and he lost no time in going to her.

"Knew you of this?"

She knew full well that he returned to the manor twice a year and her mood was black. The man sensed her anger and prepared for squalls to come.

"Ay, my lady".

She was not disposed to take this answer. "Why was I not told of this? 'Tis not seemly that my people should live so".

Her snapped words angered him. "I tried to tell you. Your ladyship was busy on.....other matters. I could not compete with Simon Burley" he added bluntly.

Behind her steel, Elizabeth flushed scarlet and her eyes were chips of flint. Busbridge thought briefly that she would strike him, so purposefully did her right hand clench. But she mastered herself with an effort.

"So that was the way of it". Her voice had the ugly, manly edge that he knew so well. "I will see you in my chamber when I have lain aside mine armour". He backed his horse, red-faced and angry.

Not a word, black or white, did Elizabeth speak more. They clattered past the cots, over the drawbridge and into the courtyard of her home. Leaping from the saddle, she tossed the bridle to an astonished servant, and strode into the house without a backward glance. Alard gave the necessary orders to the men and followed her mentor, ill-at-ease.

As she walked, Elizabeth removed her bascinet, letting her hair cascade over her shoulders. An aged servant bowed low before her; she nodded at him shortly, pausing at the entrance to the solar.

"These rushes are filthy" she snapped, nose wrinkling with distaste, "see to it.....now". The last word was a bark and the man scurried away.

She passed on to her private chamber and called for Jane to unbuckle her plate. This was Busbridge's function but she had no wish to see him until she had control of her temper. Jane did as she was bid, fumbling inexpertly with the straps. Her armour, Elizabeth noted with Amazonian approval, was not quite as glossy as it had been when Jane had left London. It had stopped two arrows at least and numerous blows from sword and bill. Ay, Jane Alard would be a good comrade-in-arms with a little instruction. She would see to it, but not now. Freed of her own harness, Elizabeth did the same for her friend, fulminating all the while.

"The place is a pig-sty" she snarled, "both this and the village. Have been away too long. They need a strong hand and by the Mass, they shall have it. They shall know Elizabeth of Echyngham is home again, I warrant you. That thrice-damned steward's fault, stealing my revenues to line his own greasy pouch I'll be bound. I shall two words to say to him, shifty eyed weasel that he is. May God damn his soul to everlasting fire!".

"Elizabeth!". Alard was shocked.

The Echyngham anger found a new victim. "Fore God, Jane, I have enough to contend with this day without piety. If you would stay with me, learn that running an estate is not to be done without sternness. Men respect not goodness, only strength". She smashed her clenched right hand into the palm of her left by way of emphasis. "And by my father's memory I swear to all the saints that these people will rue the day they let my people live so". She forced a lop-sided smile. "Go, shed your mail and return to me. We will sift this matter to the dregs. And send my woman to me".

As she went Alard bit her lip in vexation. She was not without guilt herself. She had a manor, nay, two, in Kent. She had never seen them, yet she lived off her rents. Her conscience was bad. When the danger was over, she would take up the reins herself, rule as Bess ruled, with firmness and justice. Ay, she would do that.

Elizabeth meanwhile was striding her chamber like a caged lioness, muttering all the while. She was hard but, she told herself, just; in her father's time, no peasant had lived so. The security of the lord demanded that the peasant be kept contented. Poverty bred rebellion she knew. Riding in this very day she had seen the malevolence in their eyes as they watched their grand mistress ride by. One fellow had even spat as she passed. Her gorge rose afresh at the thought.

She looked around her with disparagement. Her home was old-fashioned and inconvenient. It had never occurred to her before but her stay in London had given her new standards. Tiled floors and fur rugs, rather than the time-honoured rushes. Elizabeth had a taste for luxury. The old generation had been content with so little. She decided, then and there, that if she lived there would be alterations at Echyngham. The curtain wall would be heightened and strengthened and her private apartments rendered new. Ay, that was the way of it.

Within the hour she was dressed in black and sat at her ease. Jane sat opposite, eyes downcast, busy with her everlasting embroidery. Blue suited her, Bess thought. A remarkable woman, that, timid as a nun, yet brave enough, as her work at Lamberhurst proved. Ay, a lass of parts.

Below, in the courtyard, Busbridge leaned against the keep wall, whistling an air and waited for the summons he knew would come. When it did come, in the person of a house servant, he signed himself, knowing the woman he served only too well. Mother wit, desert me not now, he muttered to himself. Then he was before her, she who he coveted and did resent, both at the same time.

"So, all this is my fault, Henry?". Elizabeth's voice was silky now, but dangerous, and squire and lady did glare at each other. Jane, troubled, raised her eyes, watching apprehensively.

"I tried to tell your ladyship. You were not interested. I call Mistress Alard to witness".

"'Tis so indeed. I mind it well, Bess. You were too..... too..... I mean.....". Her voice faltered, then trailed off into silence, her face pink with embarrassment.

"You mean I was too busy playing whore". Bess gave a crooked smile.

"Bess!".

"What you meant, is't not?". Alard's voice was barely audible as she answered in the affirmative. The squire thought how sweet and womanly she was, compared with his shrew of a mistress. "So I was" Elizabeth shrugged, "I am no nun, God be praised". She turned to Busbridge, "So the fault is mine. I can scarce deny it. Thus, as you would probably not wish to fight me, I apologise for my words".

Fight her? Not if he could help it, thought the man. Her arm was as strong as any man's. He knew, he'd faced her in practice. She was the purest poison, and he resented it. "No apology needed" he grunted; "you are mistress and can say what you wish".

"Nonetheless, I do apologise. You were right and I was wrong". She paused. "Where is that steward I was misguided enough to appoint?".

"He rode this morn, no man knows whither".

"Bring him to me when he returns. I care not the hour. Is it understood".

"Ay, my lady".

"And find my Rector and send him to me now".

His foot had scarcely ceased to sound on the stair when Jane ventured a timid criticism. "Are you not overly hard on Master Busbridge?".

Elizabeth smiled. "Men are like children, and have to be ordered so. You hold land but know not its management". There was a brief silence. "Henry is a gentleman, a good soldier and served my father right well. He has no love for taking orders from a lady. That is all there is between us". A long silence folded down, before she added: "But the peasants are another case. They have to be ruled with an iron hand. Most of them have only the wit to eat, drink and breed".

"And now there is talk of rebellion".

"Ay, rebellion". Elizabeth flicked a piece of dust from her gown, frowning. "It will be put down as always. They will be smashed and it will be small loss if they die. Very small loss.

'Tis greed and envy makes them turn to rebellion. You saw them when we rode in today?". Alard nodded, troubled. "They hate us. They would pluck us from our high places if they could. Thus, we must keep them in subjection. Were it not so, our throats would soon be slit".

"Yet you were angry at the state of the cots".

"Very likely". Elizabeth drummed on the chair arm. "I seek not needless trouble. Fill their bellies and keep them dry and they will do all you say. That is my only concern". Jane opened her mouth, but she was stopped with a gesture. "I do not say that they have no cause for just complaint. Most of our kind are lax. You have yourself been lax. I, too, have been lax, I acknowledge it. Matters will be put right. But rebellion we dare not countenance. Nobody, peasant or landowner, will take from Echyngham what they have. I hold my lands in trust for those who come after".

Doubtless Jane would have said more but for the arrival of the Rector of Echyngham, Master Adam de Foxearle. It was he who had married Margaret and Roger de Boxhull. A local man, he had served the cure for nearly twenty years and had flecks of grey with the passage of time. As the Echyngham family owned the advowson and he owed everything to them, he had come quickly. Elizabeth was gracious, motioning him to a seat opposite her.

"Father, 'tis many moons since I have seen you".

His smile was gentle. "Five years, as I think, lady Elizabeth. Much has happened in that time". It was not clear whether he was trying to convey a reproof or not, but the chatelaine bridled.

"Tell me some of these events, Reverend Father". Her voice was barbed and clerical eyebrows raised at the imperiousness of her. Women should be kept in their due place, he thought, not have power.

"Your eyes will tell you to what I refer".

Alard noticed the two spots of fire on her friend's cheeks. She feared an outburst, but there was no explosion; Elizabeth counter-attacked, as was her nature. "What has happened here? I have sent to you for a plain account. You recommended my steward to me. Whence comes his lack of concern over my people's welfare?".

"Ay, ay" muttered the priest, in full flight, "I recommended him, fool that I was. Has proved himself a drunkard, a haunter of ale-houses, associating with loose women, a defamer of the Church, a spreader of evil about his betters.....".

"About me?". The question ripped out, stopping him in mid-flight.

"Ay, about your ladyship" he admitted, hesitantly, knowing he had said too much. "No one believed him, I swear".

The smile on her haughty face was thin, and he wished himself back in his rectory. "What said he, parson?".

"I could not possibly.....".

"You can, and will".

"He named you a.....a Cock Lane prostitute, no better than John of Gaunt's Flemish whore".

"So!". The lady's knuckles showed white as she gripped the arms of her chair. "I thank you, Father, for opening my eyes to this man. Is there aught else I should know?"

The priest's eyes wandered absently to Jane Alard, and back again before he replied. He wondered much as to the two women's relationship. "I know only that he associates with rovers and men of no consequence. I have heard that he is cup-fellow with Will Haswell, the smith, of Salehurst, who has been excommunicate these many years. 'Tis even said this Haswell is a leader of the peasants in these parts. 'Tis not my parish so I know not."

"Know you of peasant meetings here?"

He was silent for a long moment. "Ay. I doubt not that sedition is being sown, and weapons forged by night. I cannot but say to your ladyship's face that when men live in such misery, 'tis natural that they should combine together.....".

"Enough!" she snapped. "'Tis not for the parsonage to reprove the manor. You may go" she added coldly, "and forget not that my father made you and I can break you".

It was no idle threat and he withdrew with outraged dignity, red of face. Alard was aghast at her friend's temerity.

"You go too far, Elizabeth" she remarked, with spirit. "A priest of Holy Church sent packing by a.....".

"Silence! I need no tutoring from you in what I may or may not do. I am the law here and have no mind to play the weakling in face of these rebellious animals. If I choose they will live and die in their native filth. As for the priest, I will find means to bridle his tongue". Jane Alard rose, pale as death, facing her furious friend. They glared at each other, as Elizabeth rose. "Unless you wish me to fell you as you felled the London fellow, get to your chamber and that now. I will not be crossed by an Alard any more than by a peasant".

Whether deliberately or not Elizabeth had approached the holy of holies of her caste. Jane's hand flashed out and she reeled across the room, her cheek stinging from the blow. Putting her hand to her face, she gazed at her attacker wide of eye.

"Jane.....Jane....." she cried, uncertainly, groping for her chair. "My dear, how could you?"

"If you insult my family again, I will kill you". Jane's eyes blazed. Elizabeth stared, as if seeing her for the first time, bereft of speech. "You hear me?".

"By the Mass! 'Tis well we are not in harness". She felt her cheek tenderly. "Come I apologise, my mouse..... nay, by the Saints, that will not serve any more. Vixen is more in keeping, I am thinking". Her laugh was uneasy.

Jane exhibited all the signs of injured vanity and Elizabeth marvelled, comprehension dawning slowly. The spirit of the Alards was slowly escaping from the straightjacket that piety had imposed on it. The felled Londoner had been the cork escaping from the bottle; the spirit, once released, would not be easily controlled. Elizabeth remembered some words of her father: "Call no man weakling, for the less he may be disposed to violence, the greater may be his courage

in an extremity". She saw the chill in Jane's eyes and understood that no longer would she be free to vent her ill-humour on Alard. She would have to take care.

"I shall not forget your words, Elizabeth". The eyes still smouldered, haughteur still present in the satin-skinned face.

"Then let it be a matter of debate between us..... when occasion serves". Irritation was arising afresh in the Echyngham breast. Elizabeth had no wish to cross swords with her, but a drubbing she needed, if only to rid her of this new found arrogance.

"'Tis well. I take it no further.....now". She plumped down, silent and flushed, but still smarting in her self-esteem.

Elizabeth wanted to laugh but dared not. What a shrew had been conjured up out of a timid mouse! They sat, not speaking, for a long time. She ate an apple, eyeing her friend's fingers moving deftly across her embroidery and the downcast head. She was so engaged when a noise in the courtyard below caused her to frown. Rising, she left the chamber without a word.

Sweeping down the stone stairs, she met a servant hastening up. He stared, goggle-eyed, after the nature of men, at her rustling magnificence. He opened his mouth to speak but she cut him short with a gesture.

"I guess your errand. Henry Busbridge wants me? The steward, no doubt".

"Ay, my lady".

"Attend me, then".

The scene in the courtyard would have been comic had she not been so angry of heart. Feminine mildness was not for her. Torches lit the walls and beneath the pump lay a figure; wielding the pump handle with fluent profanity was her squire. The water gushed forth on the recumbent one's face but he did not respond to the water's embrace. Grinning men-at-arms surrounded the pump but seeing their resplendent mistress, gave way, so that she stood by Busbridge's side before he heard her above the clank of the pump, the splash of the water and the rumbling of his own oaths.

"He has returned, then?"

Busbridge jumped, and turned. "Returned? Nay, he was found in a ditch, with a flask to his lips". He grunted in disgust. "Rolling drunk, by Our Lady, a useless, traitorous dog".

Staring at the cause of her troubles, her lip curled in disdain. "Faugh! As you say, a useless dog. No life yet?".

Busbridge swore. "Stand away, Lady Elizabeth. 'Twould be a pity to soil such a famous gown with water. Will get him sober by morn or will know the reason why". He kicked the man savagely. The steward merely grunted, continuing to snore enough to waken the dead. Elizabeth gave a half smile.

"You are gallant, Henry. Ay, bring him to me in the morn. I will then have mollified my wrath.....mayhap". She nodded in friendly fashion to her men and departed. Gazing after her, it seemed to them that she glided.

Walt Lade scratched his grizzled head. "There goes a woman. What say you, lads?"

There was a chorus of assent but Busbridge scowled. "Help me get this bastard to the stables, Walt. Let him sleep it off. Must have innards like a damned ox". He grinned lewdly. "Ay, she is all woman. A damned tongue but a good piece of flesh. Make a good bedfellow sometime, I doubt not. Like a wench with spirit, worth the taking".

The older man grunted derisively. "Might lay you. Have felt her hand afore this, Master Busbridge. Like to be a fly on the wall, come that day".

The next morning Elizabeth walked the battlements of her manor-house and stared gloomily down at the almost dry moat. Her gown rippled in the slight breeze that caressed the valley. It was June and the sun had much power. There was more than a little happiness in her smile. She sought the domed mass of Burgh Hill, thick with dangerous forest, which swept down to the valley floor. Even as she watched, a flock of rooks rose protestingly into the sky. Elizabeth of Echyngham was a good soldier and knew how to read the signs. The house was being watched, she was being watched. A muscle in her cheekbone tightened. It would take a good archer, but good archers abounded. She shrugged, but nonetheless prudently moved so that a projecting tower wall screened her.

Beside her, on the right, rose the bulk of the church tower. Her eyes flickered up to where the weather vane, new in her day, remained stationary, its fretty design mirroring her coat of arms. She smiled, well remembering the day it was set there. Sir William de Echyngham, her father, had stood where she now stood. It had been her birthday and he had, somewhat grandiloquently she thought, remarked that it would be there, drawing men's eyes upwards, when her dust had been scattered by the winds of time. Her dust! The thought of death brought awareness of her situation.

She gazed out over the sun-drenched landscape, flat and lush, watered by the river. A fair inheritance, she told herself proudly, rich and fruitful. Yet vulgar hands were reaching up to take it from her; her eyes hardened in anger. The village was a reproach to her. She no more than glanced at the cots, but the sight did not lessen her ire.

Abruptly she turned to look north along the valley. Above the trees she could see the tower of Shoyswell. Briefly the thought of riding over to see old friends occurred to her but she rejected it. At heart she was prudent; inescapable danger summoned her courage, but running an unnecessary risk was foreign to her nature. Remembering that Glottingham tower could be seen from this walk, she turned again, shielding her eyes, to gaze south with eagerness and a heart that raced. Her beloved sister and the lord of Glottingham, now home as she had heard. Wistfully she thought of taking her men and riding to Glottingham. If she had to die, it would be mighty comforting to do so with her sister and brother-in-law, and not alone, like a rat in a trap. Yet again she put the thought from her. It was the purest pride.

She had sworn an oath before her father and before God that, come what may, she would defend Echyngham to the death. Not noticeably devout, this was an oath she fully intended to keep. So her tough mind closed against the instinct to flee. She remembered how it had been, the relationship between her father and herself. Once Margaret had married, she, the eldest daughter, had to be the knightly son he had yearned for.

He had lain dying and, acutely aware of the fact that he had no male child of an age to bear arms, had brought a tearful Elizabeth to his bedside and had made her swear on her soul's salvation that she would die in the ruins of Echyngham sooner than capitulate to an enemy. Elizabeth, nothing loth, swore the oath and her father sighed his satisfaction.

A man's man, he had reared his two daughters as toughly as he would have done a son. It was tragic that he never knew the son that was to be born to him posthumously. Yet he knew the Echyngham honour was safe in the hands of his daughters; he knew the arrogant pride of them, the courage, the inner toughness, half-inherited and half-instilled painstakingly into those most receptive of women. He could die in peace.

At his command, she had donned steel for him and knelt by his bed, until the end. She remembered that face. Once so ruddy, it had been as alabaster, the skin tight-stretched over the bones. Fearless to the last, he made her kneel there while he received the last Sacraments; death was just the last enemy to be vanquished. "You must grow used to death" he had said faintly, "you will see much in your life".

So, about midnight he had slipped away from her, the great warrior in his last extremity. It had been edifying to her; this good and Catholic end, and she fully intended to prove worthy of him.

Thus, she would stay at Echyngham, come what may. Even as she resolved to do so, she eyed the decaying masonry with misgiving. Looking towards Glottingham again, she thought she had seen the sun glinting on steel, far away over the countryside. Her heart bounded at the sight. Though a league away, the castle stood high on its hill, clearly visible. She tore her eyes away.

At this point Jane Alard gained the battlement without Elizabeth hearing her, and she was duly surprised at the feel of a hand on her arm.

"You rise late".

Alard ignored the thrust, gazing at the landscape happily: "Better than stinking London".

Elizabeth did not contradict her. It seemed that the quarrel of the previous evening had been forgotten. There was silence for a while before Jane drew attention to a fact which Elizabeth, pre-occupied as she was, had not remarked.

"Where are your serfs? They are not in the fields".

It was going on for midday and she frowned: "Ay, you are right, Jane. Had not noticed it". A cloud passed over her face. "I like it not. Fetch me a servant".

Jane did as she was bid and soon that worthy stood before them. Safe in the knowledge that she was mistress and the law in Echyngham, Elizabeth was imperious and arrogant as usual.

"Where are the serfs? They should be toiling in the fields".

Watching the fellow closely, Alard saw a momentary flash in his eyes, and thereafter a sullen look spread over his face. He was young, black-haired and strong and Jane felt herself wishing for a dagger. She shuddered, remarking his width of shoulder and hoped Bess would not press him unduly.

"I know not, Lady Elizabeth". The last two words were forced through his lips. The fact was not lost upon his interrogator; her eyes glinted at such open rebellion. But her voice was quiet when she spoke.

"You know well and I want an answer.....now".

He stared back hostilely. She was only a wench when all was said and done. "Some secret meeting belike" he admitted grudgingly. "I know not. My work is in the kitchen".

"It may be, but you know what I wish to know. These meetings now.....tell me about them".

"'Twould be more than my life is worth, Mistress".

"I will protect you".

His laugh was scornful. "Your ladyship lives in the past, I think. You are in no case to protect anyone. When time is ripe they will pluck this house down stone by stone".

"Say you so?". His speech tended to worry her but she could not betray herself to this low born fellow. "And we are marked to die, doubtless". Her mocking half-smile chilled Jane.

"Your ladyship has spoken it" he returned, bluntly. "They have sworn that you shall die".

"Who are 'they'".

He grinned. "Nay, I know not. Bellhurst belike".

Elizabeth could cheerfully have struck him. It was certain that he knew much that she would gladly have known but it was also certain that he would never tell her anything. He hated, and her rank did not impress him. Rank, she knew, was only a bulwark when it was respected. She also knew men, both instinctively and by experience, and a peasant's dourness was no new phenomenon to her. Once she had battered her head against this particular wall but had long since come to terms with the fact that if a man is determined not to reveal anything, thumbscrews will not wrest it from him. Thus, she controlled her anger and dismissed him with more graciousness than Jane, who had watched her smouldering eyes with anxiety, had believed possible. Her astonishment caused Elizabeth to smile wryly.

"Nothing to be gained by pressing him. Would not have spoken".

"Not under torture?"

It was Elizabeth's turn to be amazed. "You are a bloodthirsty lady" she stated positively.

"Did you not say our backs are to the wall?".

"Ay, I said so. If I can do no better, I will have him tortured. For now, let it pass". She was quiet for some while before explaining. "My father - God rest his soul - never resorted to torture. Though the dungeons are well provided with toys proper to such an exercise. Nay, my father called it a misuse of power and never would. Nor will I, except in the last extremity. If a man displeased my father, he felled him with his fist. I may not have all my father's strength but I have enough". The understatement made Jane smile.

"Mayhap Master Busbridge knows something".

"Mayhap". Elizabeth was amused. "But Henry sympathises with the peasants".

Alard was startled. "Then we are lost, sure".

"Not so. He may sympathise with them, but he will not join them. Of that you may rest assured".

"How can you be so sure?".

Again a maddening smile. "'Tis easy, Jane. There is something Henry wants very much. This will keep him loyal to Echyngham. And where he is loyal, the men will follow".

The distinguishing feature of Jane Alard was her innocence. "What is it that he wants?".

Cynically: "Me, Jane". Alard open her eyes very wide indeed. "Ay, Master Busbridge is ambitious. He wishes to lay me, that is certain". She chuckled. "Who knows? Mayhap one day I may let him".

"You try to shock me, Bess".

"I tell you true. Have you not remarked him? The man stays with me because he desires me. Well, let him desire away. He is not the first to covet this my body, as you know well, nor will he be the last I dare swear".

"And you will.....accommodate him?".

Elizabeth laughed heartily. "A fine word, truly. Accommodate! I must remember it. Why, I might, one day. If he serves me well in this danger, he will deserve some recompense. I may even take him to husband, might do worse. We are much alike, he and I; two of a kind as the phrase now is. And he is, after all, a gentleman of coat armour". She stared out along the river valley. "But now I have more important business than producing a bastard for Henry Busbridge".

Jane sighed. "Is this why he accepts your public humiliations?".

"It is so". Again that wicked smile, knowing and reckless, that drove men to a frenzy. "A man must pay for his pleasures in some way, if not in jewels, then by degradation. Henry knows this and is content to pay the piper. He will have his revenge by providing my abasement, come the day. You know so little of men, Jane. They have a secret dream, did you not know? It is that they will one day make their lady beg for mercy. For this dream they will do much". Her silver trill bounced off the tower wall. "Poor Henry! He knows me little that thinks I would beg any man for mercy".

"Yet you might". Alard was ill-at-ease with the subject. "You have said I know little of men. Yet I am told that it is great pain to be.....to be.....".

"Assuredly. Yet you are no woman if you would shrink from such an encounter. Do you not hope to marry one day? To have a brood, a line of chicks?"

"Ay, of course. But with the blessing of Holy Church, I will never play whore".

Elizabeth loved her friend for being all the things she could never be and spoke gently: "And you are right, Jane. That is the way, the best way, the only possible way in the end. But I can be no other than I am. God is very merciful and will forgive my frailties, I doubt not". She paused awkwardly. "You must not think I do not know that I sin most grievously. I do, and I confess my sin before God and the priest. I sincerely mean to live a better life each time the good Father absolves me. Yet I am weak of flesh, sensuous and venal. I do the very thing I have determined not to do the moment a man whispers sweet words into my ear. Despise me, Jane, if you will, but know that you cannot despise me as much as I despise myself".

The patent sincerity pricked Alard's generosity. "I have always known it was weakness, not wickedness, that beset you. Would I have stayed, else".

The warmth of her affection moved Elizabeth and she sighed, thanking her for her fidelity.

Alard was about to reply when a gesture stopped her. Elizabeth had her head on one side, listening intently. Her keen ear had detected the sound of horses hooves, and now Jane heard them likewise. They came from the north and hurrying along the wall the two ladies saw them in the distance, the sun glinting on steel.

"Can you make out their coats?"

Alard's eyes were good. "John Halle's men. Six of them".

"Go tell Henry. See that refreshment is provided for them. 'Tis mighty hot in the saddle".

They were indeed Halle's men. Prudent as ever, he had sent letters to each landowner in the Rape of Hastings, giving warning of dangers to come. Elizabeth went down to them, resplendently feminine. She had a fondness for the dramatic entrance.

Tall, bearded Richard Standborth drank deep of his ale and turned to salute her. He tendered her a letter which she read closely, raising her face to his, gravely. "Master Halle expects trouble?"

"Ay, lady. Picked up a rover a week back. They seem hot against your ladyship".

"Doubtless. What does Halle advise".

He pulled at his black beard. "Thought your ladyship was in London still. But I know his mind".

"Speak it".

"That you should take yourself to Glottingham and that right speedily". Gazing around with disparagement he added: "If you sneezed, Echyngham would fall".

Elizabeth reddened. "I will think on't" she replied shortly. "There is more?"

"Nought but that he would be surprised at your ladyship being here with such force. Why leave London, mistress?"

"More room to wield a sword in the country".

Standborth had heard of Elizabeth de Echyngham and grinned his appreciation of the remark. "I hear your father speaking" he laughed, thereby paying her the compliment she liked most to hear. "But 'twould be safer at Glottingham".

"Will think on the matter".

"Think not too long. The matter is urgent".

The men rode away and Elizabeth re-read the letter. Halle seemed certain of trouble. He was not a man to over-react, as she knew well. The Feast of Corpus Christi! She passed the missive to Alard, who perused it carefully.

"We have time" she shrugged in answer to Jane's unspoken query. "Will sleep on it". She took an apple from the wooden bowl and plunged her sharp teeth into it.

"But it seems that Master Halle wishes us to leave Echyngham. Do we ride?"

"Mayhap".

"Ay, but when?"

Another shrug. "Mayhap tomorrow. Will think on't".

Jane looked at her straitly, one winged eyebrow raised. "It seems urgent".

"So the man said".

"Therefore.....".

Elizabeth frowned impatiently. "I have said I will think on't. 'Tis enough".

"Nay, by the Mass, it is not enough!". Alard was determined to bring her to a conclusion. "My life is at stake. Throw your own life away an' you will. Have no right to throw mine away".

The lady took another bite at the apple and fixed her with a cold and contemptuous eye. "The door is open. Take your men and go if you are so minded. The road to Winchelsea lies before you".

"You know well I have no skill in these matters. I lack not courage but courage is not enough. Would you have me lead my fellows into an ambush?"

"Await my decision then. You have no other course".

"But" wailed the woman, "we shall be killed in our beds".

"Tish!" Elizabeth smiled. "I know not what to make of you, Jane. Sometimes you show courage with a hand eager for the sword; then you behave like the veriest nun. At times you speak of crossing swords with me over a word spoken in anger, and now you act like a poltroon. You are not consistent. I tell you, you puzzle me". Alard fell silent and Elizabeth's smile broadened. "Were you never taught by the good sisters of Malling that one of the duties of our class is to die well? It encourages the lower orders".

Alard had seen her friend in this mood before and knew her passage would not be easy. "Elizabeth de Echyngham" she replied formally, but with some asperity, "my family is as good as thine and I am not afraid to die. But I have no mind to throw my life away. That is folly, as you well know".

Elizabeth was immediately on the defensive. "Ay, I know. You do indeed share my fate, therefore I explain why I hesitate". And she told her of the oath to her dying father and Jane was silent a long time.

"A dread oath. He had no right to exact it from a wench".

"He had every right".

"Well, well, who am I to criticise? But 'tis pity you had no brother of your own years".

"Ay, Thomas is but six as yet. He is safe with aunt Isabel at Warbleton, that is one comfort. Father sired him afore he died. A bonny babe, by Our Lady! He will be a rare chip off the block, I'll swear". She sighed. "I have not seen him these three years, more shame to me".

"Your father married late?"

"Ay, he wanted a son. Margaret and I were the only issue from his first wife, a sore disappointment for a man like Sir William. Mayhap that is why he taught us the arts of war so thoroughly". Her eyes were troubled and Jane looked away. "That is why Margaret and I tried so hard to be the sons he yearned for. I must be as knightly as he would have wished".

Alard protested no more. "I am content to await your decision, Bess. As you say, we can at least die well..... like true knights".

"You are a good friend, Jane, and a brave. But you speak truth. I must decide on the matter. If we are to ride, it must be tomorrow at the latest".

"Pray on the matter. Come with me, Bess. I go to be shriven. You can pray for guidance to God and Our Lady".

"'Tis sure you are too good to need a confessor".

"We all need confession. As to me, did I not have wicked, prideful thoughts of slaying my dearest friend? Did I not yearn to feel my sword mutilate your dear flesh?"

"I should have mutilated your body in return".

"It matters not. I must unburden myself. You will find a decision much easier, if you ask guidance of He who knows all".

Against this Elizabeth found nothing to say.

So it was that Jane Alard made her confession and Elizabeth de Echyngham prayed in the church that her father had rendered new. It was much the same church as we know today except that the murals depicting Christ's Passion are buried beneath several layers of Protestant whitewash, the rood has gone and a building built for the celebration of the Mass is no longer used for this purpose.

All this was far in the future and Elizabeth and her her descendants were to live and die in the Church that had led countless generations with honour to the grave. She prayed

for her father's soul earnestly, remembering his great strength, before turning to her own needs, and as she prayed a great serenity came over her. The feeling was almost physical and she wept. Kneeling by her father's tomb, she saw through tears the brass that had not yet lost its gloss of newness. Memories flooded back. He had always frowned on tears and only once had she known him to weep. That was when he laid his first wife to rest in the vast nave of St. Martin's abbey below Salehurst. She remembered it well, although she was only five years old - the monks in their cowls, the solemn dirge for the dead and her warrior father in his grief, as he bade the gracious lady farewell.

It was thus a calmer and serene Elizabeth that Jane found and escorted back to the house. On their way, they stood and gazed morbidly at the cemetery. It was little more than thirty years since Pope Innocent VI had issued his Mandate to set aside a separate burial ground for the village of Echyngham. Previous to this it had been necessary to use that of Salehurst, two leagues distant. Both ladies could not repress the thought that in a matter of days, if not hours, their earthly remains might be laid to rest in the clay beneath their feet. Alard found comfort in her friend's strong hand.

"Come" said Elizabeth stoutly, "let us on". And so saying they entered the protective walls of the manor house.

MASTER JOHN HALLE

Master John Halle sat in his chamber atop Hastings Castle and stared morosely at the tapestried wall. He asked himself, as he had so often before, why he had agreed to accept the thankless task of Castle Warden for the term of five years. The answer was simple. The people of the town had wanted it, so badly indeed that they had agreed to meet all reasonable charges. The post did have its advantages of course. In time of trouble he could draw upon the manpower of the manors forming the Barony of Hastings, which included his own manor of Gensing.

It all arose, really, out of the attack of John de Vienne, the Frenchman, in 1377, when the town was burned. The people had panicked, insisting on some kind of military presence, and as a local man of some military experience he had agreed to accept the post. Yet trade in the town continued to decline and the castle was crumbling around him. Still, he had gathered around him some six hundred good fighting men, some local, some mercenaries paid for by the town. His period as Warden ended in 1382 and nothing would persuade him to accept the post again. It was well that he had a son of sufficient age to oversee Gensing or without question he would not have succumbed to local pressure. In all innocence he had thought his duties would involve merely the protection of Hastings but he soon found that he was taking on responsibilities involving the whole Rape. It appealed to his taste for power but to little else. Small wonder that he was a worried man this day. It was a terrible responsibility, and always had been, he reflected, thinking of other men who had held similar power before him. One eye had of necessity to be kept towards the great forest of Andredeswald that barred the way to London, while the other roamed the sea for the French and such-like marauders.

He levered his stocky frame out of the chair and started to pace the chamber. Never before had he suffered so much unease. For weeks there had been rumours of disaffection, of treasonable meetings in the woods around, but probe as he might, at the close of the day he knew no more than he had at dawn. The peasants went their shut-mouthed way, leaving him none the wiser for all his questioning. But trouble was a-brewing. He could smell it, taste it even!

Coming to the window of the chamber, he stared out over the sea. It was calm as befitted a June day, yet there was a suppressed menace in the air that belied the message that the placid sea gave him. There would be trouble, he felt it in his bones. Halle growled an oath.

A man-at-arms put his head round the door: "One comes".

The Warden turned: "From the north?".

"Ay".

"A messenger mayhap".

The man shrugged: "Mayhap".

They went outside. Shielding his eyes against the sun, Halle stared north-west along the ridge road. He knew it as well as he knew his own hand. It led over the bald hill that men called Blackhorse, the blood-red heath of Senlac, to the abbey that Duke William had raised on the spot where Harold fell, to the west of the pits where the dead had been buried, as it was recorded in the chronicles.

"See nought" he grunted.

His eyes followed the man's stubby finger. "Yonder see, will leave that clump o' trees, anon".

Halle looked and saw. "The fellow rides as if the Devil were at his heels".

"Like enough". The soldier's faced cracked in a grin. "Running from the outlaws I shouldn't wonder. The hill's infested. A brave man to ride alone I reckon".

"A fool more like. Looks like a knight from his harness. Make out his arms, Richard Standbrynorth?".

"Not I. Seems to be red on his jupon. Maybe a trick o' the sun".

"Hmmm!". They watched a while longer, then Halle snapped an oath. "'Tis Boxhull, the fool. He'll end up with an arrow in his gizzard, and serve him right". The soldier grinned as Halle turned away. "What brings him here I wonder".

They were in the courtyard as the visitor rode under the gateway and dismounted. "Ha! The lion gules of Boxhull, I think".

Boxhull raised his visor and grinned. "Your eyes are good. Yet you could hardly miss it, as 'tis emblazoned here".

Standbrynorth brushed his lips with his hand and caught the reins as they were tossed to him. Halle eyed his visitor sourly. "No respect, that is what mars the younger generation". Leading the way to his chamber, he flung over his shoulder. "How is Margaret?".

"My wife?".

"Ay, your lady wife, lad. Is there another?".

Boxhull ignored the jibe. "Fair enough and sends her greetings. But this was not my reason for riding to you".

Halle slid the Bordeaux to him. "Well? Nay, before that, what ails you to ride alone? Tired of life?".

Boxhull conceded airily: "Did have a little trouble. 'Twas little enough".

"What occurred?".

"A masterless rogue dropped on me from a tree, then pulled me from the horse. Divers others ran out of the bushes to join him, Got my back against a tree and dealt with the matter".

There was a wrathful rumble in Halle's throat. "You are a fool, Roger, a fool and a dolt. A headstrong colt would have more sense. And you a man of war!". He glared. "Riding alone through outlaw infested woodland! You were lucky, let me tell you. Might well have had your throat slit. That's a fine end for a gentleman of coat armour! And its not just that, there's Meg to think of. A married man has responsibilities".

Boxhull shrugged, ill-at-ease: "Didn't think".

"Didn't think!? A fine admission to be sure. Are you not ashamed? Runs in the family, I doubt not. Your father is as hot-headed. He violated the sanctuary at Westminster, as you'll have heard. By the Mass! My blood runs cold at the very thought".

"But 'tis about the peasants I would speak". Boxhull grinned weakly, not anxious to speak about his father's scandal or his own shortcomings. "Afore I returned from France, Meg scooped up a vagabond. Said he was a forgerman. Had no paper to travel so she put him in the dungeon. You know her high-handed ways".

"Very well. But this I know, she duly reported the matter to me.....".

"Threatened him a bit and he talked. A poor fellow, she says, and a coward to boot. This rising we fear, 'twill happen this month, such was his word".

Halle knew this also, and rubbed his beard. "Telling the truth, think you?".

"Too scared to do any other. Meg has a certain reputation".

"I'll go bail the fellow has truth on his side. Has already been trouble in Essex and Kent. This much I learned from some Essex men putting into the port of Rye. 'Tis now the eighth day of June. Must put our houses in order".

"Of course.....".

"And you will be in the greatest danger. I at least have the sea at my back".

"How comes this danger?".

Halle blinked in disbelief at the question. Was he not a soldier, and a good one? "Why, the peasants will be moving towards London. Glottingham commands the valley. They have to destroy you. You're a soldier; have you ever left a stronghold in your rear? Well then, go to. It shall be your part to hold them around Glottingham. If my people do not rise, I will send a force, and with good fortune we shall crush the rising locally".

Boxhull drank deep before asking the question to which he already knew the answer. "And if you do not ride?".

"Then you may all to prayer".

"Alas, poor Meg!".

"Tish! Margaret is the daughter of a soldier, the wife of a soldier, and something of a soldier herself, save the mark! She has harness and can strike a blow if needful. If I read her aright, she'll insist on't".

Boxhull sighed. Halle stared at him curiously. So much windy woe was a matter for comment. "What ails you?".

"I still fear for my wife".

Halle had incredulity written all over him. "You are truly mad". Surely, he thought, he does not need tutoring, not after all he's done as a mercenary. "I see no problem".

Halle wondered, absently, how much Boxhull knew about his woman. It had all happened when he was soldiering of course. Meg was a sterling character, all ways round. Bloody-minded of course but still made of good stuff. As a man he hated to admit it, but there it was. His own wife had never experienced civil strife but he knew what her heart would have bade her do, had such a calamity happened. Dear Amice! When Vienne sailed into Hastings, she had automatically reached for sword and bascinet. It was not easy

for ladies, he reflected. The life was hard and often they had to undertake duties for which, in all conscience, they were scarce fitted. An unmarried lady holding a manor might indeed have a steward, but all decisions were hers. Even wedlock did not enable her to evade these responsibilities, for her husband might be much from home and she responsible for the management of the manor. They had to be able to bear the weight of steel, for in lawless times to ride about the country held risks. Footpads, outlaws, runaway serfs were many, and no respecter of persons. No, he reflected, it was a hard life.

"Roger" he muttered at last, "I would not have you feel otherwise, yet you know in your heart that Meg would die at your feet like a dog. She brought you Glottingham when you wed. You would insult her if you denied her the right to defend her home".

Boxhull nodded. "All that you say is true, yet my heart is sick". He prodded the rushes absently with his scabbarded sword. "I was a mercenary. You know why. I fought in many lands. Where the blows were thickest, there was I. Killing a man when his hand is against you is a small matter. But I was at Limoges, God help me. The slaying of the men, the ravishing of the women. 'Tis not pleasant. I was hardly eighteen". Their eyes locked for a moment in understanding. "Mistake me not. 'Tis not love, there is no love between us. But we respect each other and I owe her much. Thus my mind, my fear for my wife".

Halle understood well. "Then would you not she died from a sword thrust cleanly given than be ravished by a low born fellow and no doubt killed afterwards? Strangulation as like as not, or her throat slit. You are as a child fearful of shadows, you a knight. Fie! Marriage unmans you, lad". He rose and paced the chamber, talking all the while. "Meg is trained in her duties as your lady. Who better? In your absence she rules your land and gives judgement. And, let me tell you, does it mighty well. She has spirit and will not fail you. Meg is strong and brave. As an Echyngham she could not well be less". He came to rest in front of him. "If she is to die - and ay, it might come to that - then she will be happy to do so by your side, in the ruins of her house".

Boxhull grinned in lop-sided fashion. "Ay, I am a fool, doubtless. I did not wed a weak wench, that is certain. These are troublous times. I should be glad of her quality, I think".

"You should. Sir William bred a rare brace of daughters to his name. For all her finery, Elizabeth is no less redoubtable. A raw-boned lass as I recall, but a good piece of flesh".

Boxhull grinned lewdly. "Bess interests you?".

"Pish! I have been a widower these five years. The lady is young enough to be my daughter. Such a match would be unseemly. And she is a whore, as I hear. Is it not she who men named 'An-Acre-a-Night Bess'? Were I a younger man.....". He laughed suddenly. "And speaking of Elizabeth, she is at Echyngham".

"It may not be. She is at Court".

"Not so, my man saw her yesterday. She is at Echyngham, I swear it".

"Would be safer in London" mused Boxhull, "or maybe she knows better than I. An intelligent wench, our Bess, whore or no. How many men has she?".

"Standbynorth mentions a sizeable force, which may mean much or it may mean little. Had that wench with her..... Jane Alard, as I think".

"What draws her out of London?".

Halle guffawed. "Condescended to explain to my man that there was more room to wield a sword in the country". Both men grinned. "The heart of a man, our Bess. But she must not stay at Echyngham. Too dangerous, were she twice Sir William's daughter. Since his death, Echyngham is not a stronghold. A puff of wind would blow it over".

"Could come to Glottingham. We are strong enough".

"Ay, see to it. Tap her over the head with your mace if she prove obdurate. You have my warranty. She and the Alard wench".

"Then there is Ursula".

"Ursula?".

Boxhull retailed the visit of the Vicar of Salehurst and Halle nodded. "A wise man, Sir William. Mistress de Ukkefeld. Hmmm!". His thumb rasped through his beard. "I mind her father well. A harsh man, I recall, and an arrogant. Like father like daughter. She is indeed in great peril. You agreed to give her refuge? Of course you did. That is no problem. She too has spirit, mayhap too much from what I hear".

"My mind misgives me for her uncle".

"The priest? Ay, but it cannot be mended. The priest-hood have their duties as do we". He spoke quietly. "'Tis one thing to charge into the press and be slain in hot blood. Quite another to stay at one's post, defenceless, awaiting death. If he feels called to martyrdom, so must it be".

"And the monks of Rothersbridge?".

Halle discounted trouble in that quarter. "Well liked. Unlikely the peasants will trouble them overmuch. If you feel strongly on the matter, could warn Abbot Giles. Might be an idea".

"Will do that, I think. Both Meg and I have friendship with that house. Forget not, Sir William de Echyngham's first wife is buried there, as also my mother".

"True. So warn them. Doubt the danger myself". He grinned suddenly. "You'll find the Abbot among his trellises and vines. Will not thank you for the warning. And where could they run? No other Cistercian house in the diocese. Nearest would be.....".

"Boxley. That would be leaping from the pot into the fire. Kent more disaffected than Sussex. No matter, I will clear my conscience".

"Ay. Now mark me well, Roger. As soon as trouble begins, get a messenger off and running. Otherwise you are a dead man. And you will have to withstand siege for some hours. I promise you nothing, 'tis understood? But if my people do not rise, I will ride with all my power. Will have the tucket sounded as soon as we are close enough for you to hear. More I cannot do".

"Could ask no more. If we meet not in the field at Glottingham, it will be in Paradise".

"As you say. 'Tis a tight corner in truth; yet you have faced death often enough. But they be many and we few. Moreover, every man jack of them is trained to arms from childhood as the law provides. What must be, must be".

They spoke of other matters; then, declining hospitality, Boxhull rode again. This time he had an escort of twenty men, forced on him by Halle. They passed the bodies of the outlaws he had slain earlier. Already wild boar were sniffing around the corpses. They scampered off at their approach but they would return. Boxhull scarcely glanced at his handiwork.

He spoke not a word until he reached the boundary of his land. There he dismissed the men-at-arms. They saluted and rode back, while he continued on his way. Reining in on a rise, by a clump of oaks, he stared across the park to the castle that was his home.

The sun gleamed on the steel caps of men lining the walls. All was well, but for how much longer? Then there was a glimpse of a gown, kingfisher colour, then it vanished. Using his spurs he continued on his way.

Passing the neat cots of his dependants, he looked with pleasure on the well-fed brats that scampered to the doors. He compared his people's situation with those of his sister-in-law, the redoubtable but hated Bess, and found in the comparison matter for satisfaction, though tinged with regret at her neglect and carelessness. Even as he thought it, his hand raised in acknowledgement of franklin Merriewood as he tended his land.

Of one thing Boxhull was resolved in his mind. Despite her wellknown bellicosity, this was no place for Meg and her women. He would pack them off to her aunt Isabel at Warbleton. In a desperate situation he wanted only men around him. He knew what the common report of his wife was, her abilities, but this was well enough while the peasants were cowed. But this would be total war of which she had no experience. There was still time for her to escape from this hornets nest. Yet even as he thought it, his heart sank. He knew she would laugh in his face and refuse to budge. And he'd have to hit her and go on hitting her until she agreed. Why in God's name could she not be like other women and obey her lord without demur? Naturally, it did not work out quite as he intended. In his heart he did not want her to go, but he had to do the right thing. In reality he needed her. And there was Bess to think of, likewise the Ukkefeld woman. Women, he decided, were a damned nuisance. Fair enough in bed. That was their province. Why could they not stay out of war? It was men's business, not theirs. In the bedroom they shone. And he damned Echyngham blood to everlasting perdition.

He thought of Ursula contemptuously. There was a fool of a woman. A pervert.....but that didn't matter a damn, not to him. But he knew precisely what would happen. Rich as she was, she'd turn up at Glottingham, superbly equipped, making all kinds of brave speeches. As long as there wasn't an armed peasant on the horizon, that is. At the first arrow she'd no doubt scream and hide in the chapel. All women screamed, with a pox on it. He laughed bitterly. Damn all women for the pernicious pests they were. He should never have left France. And now he was trapped. An oath rumbled in his throat.

Inside Glottingham, his resolve wavered even more. The main meal of the day was normally eaten in the great hall with the men, around four in the afternoon. But this earlier meal they had together; and it was eaten in silence while he groped around in his not too agile mind for a painless way to broach the matter.

Margaret watched him with some astonishment, for whatever his faults were, boorishness was not one of them. She felt, moreover, that conversation was the least he could offer to ameliorate her boredom. For since Roger had returned from France, she had taken a decidedly subordinate role. From that day to this she had worn nothing but gowns, things that rustled and gave her the illusion of floating. Roger liked her to rustle, and he liked her to float. She understood very well about men's fantasies and that a gown enhanced the mystery of her secret parts. But since they were no secret to her, after a while the changes that she could produce in her man's loins began to pall. It was fun, being a woman, as she was the first to acknowledge, but her soul craved for another ingredient. Most women were content with sexual excitement but Margaret of Glottingham needed danger and adventure for complete fulfilment. While Roger was home she was little likely to get it, for she was subject to him in all matters. Even her weekly frolics with Ursula were denied her. The least he could do was to talk to her across the food and wine.

She was therefore much relieved when, after a long draught of wine, he sat back and appeared to notice her for the first time. He enquired, man-like, as to her doings during his absence, without being seriously interested. It was a duty which busy men, then as now, felt bound to undertake; and he suffered her long litany of trivia with half an ear. Presently he rose and roamed aimlessly around the chamber, pausing every now and then to frown into the distance. Margaret determined to bring him to a conclusion.

"And what thinks Master Halle of our condition?"

"Even as a ship stuck on the Goodwins, likely to be swept to its doom on the next high tide".

"Ah!". So it was out at last.

"It is understood?"

"Ay, you speak of bloody constraint, war and rapine, is't not so?"

"'Tis so wife. And I am sorry for it".

"I doubt it not, husband. And yet one dies but the once as I have heard. And you know I will die at your side. Not only my duty, 'tis my wish".

He marvelled, as always, at the hardihood of her. It was sublime. And his resolve evaporated like dew in the morning sun. Turning away, he affected to study the details of the tapestry that covered the wall. Then he spoke low: "I am at a loss to understand the goodness of God in sending you to me".

She smiled to herself. He was cornered. "Pooh!" came her gentle murmur, "we make a great coil over a crowd of unwashed, ragged traitors, do we not?"

He grunted. "'Tis not too late for you to escape, you and your ladies".

Her face was a study in shock, amazement, anger and injury. "Do you know that you insult me!"

"Nay, but.....".

"Margaret of Glottingham flee! I run from danger? Are you mad, husband? All I have built up here would crash to the ground. Would never have the love of our men again. Flee, forsooth! You know not the lady to whom you speak, it seems to me. As long as I remain the men will believe that we have a chance. I flee? Nay, good my husband, I go nowhere but where I am".

It was the rankest rebellion and his right hand bunched automatically. "You will do as I say" he grated.

"Not in this matter" she reposted, flushed of face, keeping a wary eye on his fist. "You need me, and if you know not that, why then, 'tis sad". She had it in mind to say something stronger but changed her mind. "And a broken jaw would but add to your problems".

He subsided, sinking into a chair. "I thought but of you".

"I know it. But it may not be, must not be, will not be". The courage of her race hardened the soft features. "These men strike at us, our power, our position. Crushed they must be, bloodily if they will have it so, and I intend to play my part".

Boxhull hated this side of his lady's character. But this was the Echyngham blood he had cursed, the hard warrior blood which had fought for what it had and would keep it inviolate even if they had to wade ankle deep in blood. So had she been reared, and so would she die. This much he knew and it saddened him.

The cruel streak in the Echyngham stock was a common subject of gossip. Uniformly detested by the peasants, they were just lords, if stern. From Reinbert the Sheriff, from whom they descended, to his lady, the hardness of the breed was an indisputable fact.

Sighing in defeat, he capitulated to Halle's opinion and her obvious determination. "Ay, you are an Echyngham without doubt. You are also my lady and must fight. I need every sword I can muster".

"My sword is a good blade" she smiled, proudly, "and has never been beaten down. I shall hope to slay some few before I am myself slain. 'Tis better to die in the ruins of my own home than be captured by that rabble". He stared at her keenly. Boxhull knew that beneath her malevolence was fear, a womanly fear. He knew its cause and understood it.

Forcing a laugh: "Ay, ay. But what cheer! It may not happen. The peasant is a sensible fellow".

"Do not seek to deceive me. You know well that it will be. We are in the gravest peril". Why did she sound so breathless? To change the subject, she laughed lightly. "If only Bess was with us, we would be invincible. For all that she is a wench, she has a wrist of steel. And now that she cares naught for life, she would make a rare sworder".

Boxhull suddenly remembered Halle's words. "Bess is at Echyngham".

She stood back from him, staring in disbelief. "It may not be. What would make her desert the Court?"

"There is more room to wield a sword in the country, quoth she".

Margaret came near to giggling. "'Tis like her indeed. She must come here. Did I not say it? Another sword. A doughty fighter, our Bess".

"Ay, she must come here. 'Tis said she has a lady with her. The Alard wench, doubtless".

"That will be Jane Alard, right enough. Bess took her under her wing and they have been companions ever since. The attraction of opposites. A strange affair, that. Alard is no Echyngham".

"Armed to the teeth, 'tis said".

"Very like, husband. The times are out of joint. Bess would not ride south without harness. She may be a Court lady, but she has not lost her wits!".

Grinning, he strode to the door and shouted for his squire. "Will send Robert to Echyngham to fetch Bess. I confess I shall rest easier when she is within these walls. She is so self-willed.....". He was interrupted by Robert Braban's foot on the stair. "Ah, Robert. You are to ride to Echyngham and bring back my sister-in-law. That place is no stronger than parchment these many years past. There is another lady with her. If either prove obdurate, tap them over the head with your mace. You have my authority".

Braban's bearded face broke into a grin. "May prove necessary, Sir Roger. A headstrong wench as I recall".

"Ay. I would have her here before nightfall. My mind misgives me for her. Were anything to happen, she might well ride out to do battle alone". He chuckled. "Those odds might daunt even an Echyngham".

"Not to mention that the men of Echyngham have been woefully abused of late. They would not hesitate to..... you know what I mean. Would not give a groat for her life if she is there when the people rise".

"So waste no more time. Report to me on your return".

Thus it was that Elizabeth came to Glottingham. Bess was family, Boxhull thought; it was better so. He made no provision for Ursula de Ukkefeld although he might well have done. Indeed, she did not enter his head. Margaret thought of her, however. She had heard that she had left High Ridge with her squire, and now lodged with her uncle at Salehurst. It was dangerous but Ursula swore she would leave the old man until the last moment. Margaret was very unhappy; she loved Ursula and wanted her near. Yet she approved of her loyalty, and the feeling that her honour would be besmirched if she ran from her uncle when danger threatened. Ursula was so proud and self-confident, bless her. And yet..... and yet..... Lady Margaret busied herself with the preparations for her sister and put her lover from her mind. Or tried to.

Elizabeth had seen Braban's small troop long before they rode into the courtyard. She guessed his errand and was more than half minded to return with him, despite twinges of conscience over her broken oath. Moreover, Jane's promptings had had their effect. Bess was no fool and had, since her arrival, made a perambulation of her home and gloomily realised only too well its limitations. A determined attack would soon reduce it, and she was far from feeling the confidence she exhibited to her entourage. Braban found them in gown but on hearing his orders soon assumed warlike trappings. Braban knew her men-at-arms would be a welcome addition to the Glottingham men and he waited as patiently as he could. He viewed with resignation the packhorses which were added to the cavalcade and reflected, in common with men in all ages, at the amount ladies needed in the way of necessities. It amounted to six heavily laden horses.

As he waited with ill-concealed impatience, his keen eyes detected a furtive figure slinking behind the stables. He spat in contempt. Braban knew Elizabeth's steward well enough, and equally knew him to be cup-fellow with Will Haswell, the blacksmith at Salehurst, who common report stated to be the ringleader of local disaffection. As soon as they were started on their journey, he mentioned the matter.

"Your steward is not to be trusted" he stated bluntly. "'Twas a bad decision to appoint him".

Her closed bascinet swivelled in his direction. She was not surprised at his words and acknowledged her error. "I engaged him after my father died. The parson recommended him. I was in London. Something had to be done. Lady Margaret could not always be at Echyngham, someone had to take day to day control. He had a good reputation, or so said my rector. But I trust him not; it sticks in my mind that I would be foolish to turn my back on him. Unprotected, that is" she added, laughing.

"He will bear watching".

They said little else as they rode along the valley floor, beside the silver river. It was too hot and Braban sweated inside his harness. It seemed to him as if a river of sweat streamed over his face and he puffed and blew, trying to circulate air inside his helmet. He thought of such days when he had soldiered in Italy with Sir Roger. Elizabeth rode beside him sweating likewise but, as she reflected, better to sweat than to die. The woods pressed too close for comfort, certainly within bowshot, and she eyed them warily. Immediately behind them rode Jane Alard, and behind her the men-at-arms, surrounding the packhorses. As they drew level with Boxhull manor house, empty and decaying on its rise, the woods started to recede slightly. Braban felt happier, the more so because Boxhull marked the half-way point to Glottingham.

Alard bled in her armour and her nose wrinkled at the stale air. She too saw that the woods were receding, and with them, danger. Raising her gauntleted hand she raised the visor, drinking deep of fresh air. Robert heard the rasp of steel but the heat seemed to have deadened his brain. It was some seconds before he realised what it was and wheeled in the saddle. But it was too late.

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There was a hum as of a gigantic bee and Jane Alard, clawing at the arrow that protruded from her left eye, died instantly. Used as he was to sudden death, Braban had the vision of Alard's death etched deep into his consciousness as long as he lived. From her pointed feet to the top of her bascinet she was graven deep in his memory. The silver figure rose up in the stirrups. Then, giving a retch, she pitched forward and rolled in the dust.

It was over in seconds and Elizabeth turned her horse only in time to see the dust, disturbed by the impact of the body, settle again. Dismounting from her horse she knelt by her friend's body, feeling the colour drain from her face. There was something pathetic in the lifeless body, arms wideflung, that touched the heart. They had quarreled but they had loved each other, and Elizabeth grieved.

"She's dead" snapped Braban, somewhat unnecessarily. "A murrain! What possessed the fool to raise her visor?". He bellowed an order. "Throw her body over her horse and let us on. Hurry, Lady Elizabeth". There was little danger now, as he knew. The men had instinctively formed a ring around them, and the Echyngham wench was completely sealed, her visor fast closed. But there was no point wasting time in fruitless sorrow. Elizabeth finished her prayer and signed herself. Rising, she mounted unaided. They moved off at a smart pace.

"For your question, Robert" she explained, quietly, "she was not like me, or Margaret. She was not happy in steel. Did not realise the danger, made the wrong judgement. I have too much respect for the English archer to indulge in such folly". For a space she was silent. "She was well landed but with no experience in management. Lived off her rents but gave nothing back. She had never even seen her manors. She knew not the duties, the responsibilities, the necessity that makes a lady, unapt for such duty, don steel and fight for what is hers".

Braban grunted: "Paid the price of ignorance, then". He softened suddenly: "But she seemed a comely lady. 'Twas a terrible end. But an arrow is no respecter of persons".

"As I told her, often enough. Yet I do her wrong. At Lamberhurst we had a skirmish with outlaws and she fought valiantly. I instructed her ceaselessly, yet I feel in some sort responsible".

"She was of the Alards of Winchelsea?".

"Ay, in truth she was".

"Then she must have known of these matters, sure? A gentlewoman".

"Not so. She was raised in a nunnery. The good sisters were of virtuous life and of honest conversation, but not of this world. Margaret and I were raised sternly, much tutored in our duties and responsibilities. Thus, we learned the arts of war, mayhap unsuitable for our sex, but necessary if we were to order the management of our holdings. Had Jane known such tutoring, she would now be alive. I notice you ordered no pursuit, Robert".

"A fruitless endeavour, not to mention that we would all by now be on our backs in similar condition".

"Doubtless. 'Tis strange, Robert, is it not" she went on conversationally, "only yestereven I told her, half in jest, that a duty of our class is to die well. We can agree, I think, that she died without fuss, like a knight?".

In her mouth it was a compliment. "Ay, 'tis true enough". But he chafed under the knowledge of Alard's death. He glanced behind at the silent body, a thin trickle of blood coursing along the shaft. A life foolishly spent is a life foolishly lost. She might have struck a blow, might Alard, though she was no Echyngham. He fumed impotently at the loss. "That is a good armour. With her visor down, 'twould have withstood many an arrow and more besides. Not English, I think".

"From Milan. Negroli, as is mine". She tapped her plated leg. "Fine steel as you say. I make it a rule never to economise on essentials". She returned to Alard, sadly. "I had long urged her to buy harness. If land is necessary to position, so is armour. A lesson she never learned, or learned imperfectly". Elizabeth sighed, then turned the conversation to a jest. "A windfall for Margaret. Same height, same build; and 'tis virtually unmarked. She always had an eye for excellence, I mind. Ay, we'll strip Jane when we reach Glottingham". It wasn't callousness, just brutal realism. Alard no longer had any use for armour. "'Twill be a fine present - even if the occasion is a sad one" she added, with womanly softness.

Braban reflected on the Echyngham wenches and their hardness of spirit. Most ladies would, he knew, have wept and wailed at having a friend struck down before their eyes. But Elizabeth thought like a soldier, sudden death was no stranger. He praised all the Saints in the Calendar that Lady Elizabeth was not a weeper or a swooner. He, Robert Braban, could deal with most things, but a fainting lady left him totally at a loss.

"You will be happy to see Lady Margaret again" he ventured. Elizabeth's eyes lighted up and hidden though they were, he could guess at their brilliance. The most perfect eyes in all the world, he mused.

"Indeed, Robert. 'Tis many moons since I rode to Court. Has she changed much? Is she still the gentle, timid wench I once knew".

He laughed and she with him. "Nay, indeed, I had never considered her such. A fine spirit. . . The men would follow her to Hell, saving your presence, Lady Elizabeth".

"And knowing my sister, Robert, I have no doubt that is a journey they might have to make. But see, the towers of Glottingham". She pointed along the hillside. It was a thrilling moment.

They clattered over the drawbridge, under the raised portcullis and into the courtyard. Roger and his lady awaited them. Elizabeth sprang from her horse and into her sister's arms before greeting her brother-in-law. Meg's eyes lighted on Alard's body, slung over the horse. She raised an eyebrow, turning to her sister, questioningly.

"One who fancied she rode in Cheapside and raised her visor. By name, Jane Alard" Elizabeth explained, without emotion.

"Alas! Poor lady".

Elizabeth shrugged. "Brought it on herself, Meg. The hair stareth on my head when I think of her folly".

Boxhull, meanwhile, was examining the armour with a professional's interest. "Milanese, as I judge?".

"As you say".

He looked speculatively at his lady. "Your size. 'Tis fine steel, Meg. But for the lady, 'tis sad". Then to Braban: "Where did it happen?".

"Where the woods start to leave the road. Doubtless thought danger at an end".

"Doubtless, doubtless". Boxhull motioned to two men-at-arms. "Bear to the chapel room, have her stripped. Take the harness to my chamber". As Alard was borne away, he turned to Elizabeth. "These are your lads?".

"Mine and Jane's". She beckoned them forward. "My right trusty fellows, as from this time you will take orders from Sir Roger, as from me". She stood feet apart, hands on hips, smiling. "Master Jordan, I have no power to order you or the men of Winchelsea, but I ask that you give your loyalty to Sir Roger also. Mistress Alard would have wished it".

The man nodded gravely. "Sir Roger is a known man. We shall be proud to serve under his banner".

Elizabeth named her men to the knight, and he recognised many names.

"Lads" he addressed them in manly fashion, "you will not suffer from serving Boxhull instead of Echyngham and Alard. Wat Cruttenden here will show you where the buttery lies. Whatever we lack, we lack not ale. Wat, see them fed, man and beast". He grinned at the gruff murmur of approval. "Now, Bess" he joked, clapping her on the shoulder with sufficient strength to make even her knees buckle, "Meg frets at my holding you talking. I see from the packhorses that you have much women's stuff to gossip over. On your way, then. I have much to see to afore we eat".

Left alone with Braban, he drew him to one side. "Any trouble, apart from the Alard wench?".

"None. Saw Lady Elizabeth's steward though. Shifty fellow enough, not to be trusted. Seen him drinking with Haswell. A trouble maker".

"Think you the arrow was meant for Bess?".

"Nay, she was with me, at the front. Alard was behind us. 'Twas the open visor that drew the shot, and, by the Mass, 'twas a good shoot. To have loosed a shaft at the Lady Elizabeth would have been folly at that range. England breeds famous archers but this one must have had his bow drawn to his ear in readiness for some such stupidity. I know only one man good enough for such a shoot. Jack Mephram, he who fled to the greenwood. Felt we were being watched all the way, but not a twig stirred".

Boxhull knew his squire too well to question the assessment. When Robert said a thing was so, it was so.

"What think you of our situation?". Boxhull's eyes held those of his friend.

Braban shrugged in total unconcern. "We shall survive. We always have".

Boxhull grunted at the confession on faith. "You remember Limoges?".

Braban changed colour. "Ay, I remember. But that will not happen here".

"Will it not? One can easily see you are not a married man". He went from him.

He had done well to remember Limoges, Braban thought. Doubtless the men of that city had consoled themselves similarly before their homes fell to the Black Prince. He remembered the horrors that town suffered when the English soldiers poured in. The indiscriminate slaughter of the population, the raping of women, the child murders, appalled him. Many ladies of Limoges, screaming their terror, had leapt from the walls to escape the lusty English soldiers. He closed his eyes against the vision, the screams and death cries that would always haunt him. Both he and Sir Roger had been young then, too young for war. With their friends Robert Hauley and John Schakell they had hacked defenceless women, impotent old men and children into untimely death, sending them unshriven to their Maker. He could still feel his sword thrusting through unprotected bodies and hear the chaos, the shouting of blood crazed soldiery, the yells of terrified civilians. It sickened the soul. Now Hauley and Schakell were dead, torn from the sanctuary of St. Paul's Cathedral and slain, even as they had slain. And by whom? By Sir Roger's own father, in his capacity as Constable of the Tower. Was it fate? And did that fate now turn to Boxhull and Braban? He suddenly realised that his face was streaming with sweat and his own men were looking at him curiously. He cursed them and strode to the guardroom.

Boxhull did not refer to the death of Jane Alard until after the evening meal. Why should he? Life was cheap and she was only a wench when all was said. But after he had eaten his fill he leaned back, well content, and looked long upon his sister-in-law. She was a different Bess than the one who had ridden away to Court, in the full bloom of pulchritude, five years before. The brow was no longer unlined, the skin no longer quite as flawless. Nonetheless, life had left her singularly unmarked. Like many men since his time, he reflected that living the good life was surely overrated if sin left so little trace. Not that he had lived the good life, he a soldier. But it was expected of women.

"A friend of yours?". Her jerked his thumb towards the chapel.

"Jane? Ay, a friend".

He said nothing for a moment, casting about in his mind for a way to ask a question without causing hurt. "Two of a kind, mayhap?".

Elizabeth flushed slightly, eyes downcast and troubled. "Nay, I know what is in your mind. The wrong one died. She was an angel".

He grunted and was silent for a while. Of what use to say he was sorry? He disapproved of Elizabeth's life, and he was not a man to play with words. He had heard men name her whore. He loved her still but with regret tinged the affectionate memories of years gone by. In the name of God, why did she have to take that road?

She of all people. He looked absently at the strewn rushes that covered the floor.

"A wasted life".

"Ay".

"Young enough".

"Too young to die". She spoke automatically, embarrassed. To be despised by a man was humiliation, and by this man, agony. The one man she wanted to esteem her and he condemned her in his heart. Boxhull looked at his wife and almost imperceptibly jerked his head. She nodded, making an excuse to leave the board. The rustling of her gown died away. Roger finished his wine, watching Elizabeth all the while.

"We have things to say to each other" he announced finally.

She looked up. "Ay".

"Well?"

She seemed at a loss for words and he laughed without humour.

"Well may you be tongue-tied, Elizabeth".

"In the name of Our Lady, have mercy, brother-in-law". Tears welled in her eyes, making those orbs even larger. "Think you I do not know you despise me?"

Boxhull was a man, and therefore a weak thing where a woman's tears were concerned. He stared at the wall ill-at-ease, uncertain whether the tears were induced and false, or spontaneous and a true reflection of inner feelings. She read his mind and sank deeper into misery.

"Think you I play on your feelings as I might on another man's? I do not". He did not reply and she suddenly had a great flare of anger. "Oh, you men! Let a lady fall, and great is your contempt. But let you go to bed with a serving-wench and who shall say you nay, or condemn you. Rather does it make you more of a man. 'Tis unfair".

"The way of the world".

Elizabeth was defiant. "So I am a whore. So be it. Take me how I am, not how I was, or how you would have me. 'Tis lonely, being a lady".

"Could have married long since, had your mind not run so on harness, swords, horses and matters which are no concern of a woman. Whoever heard the like? All men know your name and speak it with foul jest in alehouse and tavern. The peasants hate you, your own men fear you. Have you a friend in the world, setting aside Meg and myself?"

"Sir Simon Burley.....".

"Ay, Sim Burley. Let us come to him then", Boxhull was scathing. "A lecher, a man of ill-life and worse repute, no matter for the king's favour. It makes me sick to the soul that you should have bedded with him. Old enough to be your father. And speaking of your father.....".

Elizabeth sprang to her feet, white as death. "What of my father?"

Boxhull was silent for a moment, watching her. "'Tis him I blame, bringing you up as a son. I know well you are a brave wench. I have another such. But 'tis madness. You must see it, Bess. You hinted at it yourself. A maid cannot act like a man, 'tis not seemly, 'tis not right. A man can take his pleasures where he will, but 'tis not like that for a lady. Those who do men name

whore - as they name you. No man has named you so in my presence - they know better - but behind my back.....".

She plumped down heavily, weeping unrestrainedly. "Is it really so?"

"You know 'tis so".

"Ay, I know it. My Rector told me so, no longer ago than yesterday". She covered her face with her hands. "Oh God, help me! What am I to do?"

Boxhull was disposed, and not before time, to be gentle. "Be a soldierly wench if you must. I know 'tis too late for you and Meg to change now. Control your manors, order your men, but in the name of God, be a good daughter of Holy Church. Offend not against God and man. 'Tis lonely, even as you say. But it is the way you have chosen. Accept the loneliness as you accept the power. And be a good lord to your people, see justice done. They will forget the past and rejoice in you and their good fortune. I know the peasant. Afore God, he asks little. He seeks only to be treated as a man". Boxhull paused, astonished at his own eloquence. "For myself, I do not judge you. Nor does Meg. We love you always. All we ask is that you should remember your high lineage and be worthy of it".

After the sharply administered rebuke, he left her to her tears. After a few words with her husband, Margaret returned to her sister and, clinging together, they bewailed men's double standards when dealing with the fair sex. Roger had told her that he proposed to ride to warn Abbot Giles. She opened her mouth but thought better of it.

From the battlements they watched him go, with some misgivings. It was late evening, with the sun just dipping below Brightling hill. They turned back to their chamber.

Boxhull and his men rode fast, conscious of the hour. The road was lined with dark woods, forbidding and silent. Once past the wayside cross on the hill, the road descended all the way to the abbey. Among the lengthening shadows, the spire could be seen in the valley below. Beyond it, and slightly to the north, stood the tower of Salehurst church, gaunt on its hillock; and between the two ran the river Rother.

In his heart, Boxhull knew that Halle was right about the monks, yet he owed them a warning at least. Protect them he could not, but courtesy cost nothing. The tenants of the abbey were well-treated by comparison with secular manors, say High Ridge and Echyngham, and there was little cause for apprehension. As they emerged from the woods, the road led straight up to the abbey gate, surmounted by the lifesize statue of St. Martin.

9TH JUNE, 1381

NIGHT

It was near enough midnight and Margaret and Elizabeth sat in their chamber, awaiting what fate might have in store for them.

Before his departure, Boxhull had taken his wife on one side. "Wife, when I return I expect to find you armed as for war".

"You expect trouble?".

"Constantly".

Just that, no more.

Given all that, Margaret could not quite believe the tales she had heard, that the people, outwardly so docile, would rise in bloody revolt. It seemed incredible, something out of a gleeman's ballad. She shifted in her chair, stealing a glance at her sister. In steel from top to toe, Elizabeth slept, which argued either tiredness, insensitivity or great courage. Meg wasn't sure which.

It was a warm, sultry night, without moon. Everything was completely still, as if the world held its breath. It was like the moments before a summer storm, when nature braces itself for the onslaught from above. Margaret looked again at her sister, almost resentfully. Levering herself up, she began to pace the chamber, her spurs sounding greatly in the "silent" castle. It was like a tomb.

Outside the private apartments, in the courtyard, on the stairs, in the stables, soldiers snatched what sleep they could. Everyone was armed to the teeth, most doubting that they would see another night, and that their next sleep would be the final one. And for many that would be so. But they were soldiers, and death a constant companion. As a consequence they slept soundly enough, snapping thick fingers at fear. But it was the silence that affected the chatelaine. Suddenly she could bear it no longer, and shook her sister's arm.

Elizabeth awoke, stretching luxuriously; looking up at the pale face above her she asked, what was amiss.

"Nought.....but it was so quiet".

"You wake me to tell me that?" Bess grumbled. 11:00 AM

Margaret resumed her pacing. "Would I could sleep. You must be made of iron".

Elizabeth yawned. "Mayhap I dissemble better than you, sister".

Margaret did not reply and continued to pace up and down. Elizabeth smiled, then murmured: "I wonder if we are marked to die in the morn.....what do I say? The day I mean".

Margaret halted in front of her, surprised: "Had not thought of that" she lied, clutching her sword hilt. "But phoh! we shall not die. Ladies do not die".

"A pike thrust, shrewdly given, will kill you the finest lady in Christendom. Why should it not be you?"

"Or you".

"Assuredly. I have no illusions".

"In any case, it is as God wills. But I hope not, all the same".

"Jane Alard fell.....or had you forgot?".

"She was a fool!".

"I cannot gainsay it, but I would not miscall the poor wretch, Meg. You carry her armour well. By the day's end you may have cause to bless her name".

Margaret bit her lip. "I meant no ill, Bess. I know you were friends. But such stupidity angers me".

Elizabeth nodded, smiling. She watched her sister continue her perambulation. Then suddenly she stopped before the chamber window, her body stiffening. Bess was at her side in a moment, eyes following the outstretched hand.

"You know where that is" Bess whispered. "It has begun".

A mile away across the valley, a red glow lit up in stark detail the tall tower of Salehurst church. Even as they watched, fascinated, the glow burst into a great column of fire that lit up the countryside around. The night sky burned red. It seemed almost as if the hate that for so long had hung over the land, had, by spontaneous combustion, exploded into an inferno.

Standing high as it did, Glottingham commanded extensive views and it was easy to see various parts of the horizon where the sky was tinted with red, hinting of manor house and cot in flames.

Margaret passed a hand over her eyes as if to brush away the horror that filled them. Then: "Tell me true, sister, what have we done that they should hate us so?".

"You personally? Little enough despite your heavy-handed ways. Roger nothing at all. But we must suffer for the sins of our kind".

"But Sir William" cried Margaret, bewildered. "He was a good man, after his fashion. He loved them well".

Elizabeth sighed. "Come, sister, this is not like you. Where is your far-famed intelligence? Was he not well born? Had he not the rank of knight? It is our gentility they hate, our lordly necks they wish to wring. Our men will be put to the sword, we they will rape and then slay. There is our fortune told". She shrugged, almost imperceptibly. "Mayhap history will say we deserved it. Who can say?".

Margaret slumped on to the settle and prayed. For Bess this had elements of high comedy, for her sister, though she performed her religious duties with punctilio, in truth had small piety. Yet in extremities everyone turns to God. The words of the Paternoster came softly to Elizabeth's ears. As if in a hideous dream she had a vision of Meg's bascinet crumpling like tin before a peasant's axe, the blood streaming through the vents of the visor. She closed her eyes against the vision, her left hand seeking her sword and finding comfort from it.

On a sudden Margaret looked up, wildly. "UrsulaUrsula, what of her?".

"She will be dead by now, Meg" she murmured, "unless miracles happen in these wicked days".

"Dead? Dead?". The words came dully, without any expression. "So good, so kind.....so lovely".

"Then content you, sister, she is even now in Paradise. Where else?".

"Ay, ay, where else". She spoke absently, still dazed. Then, by a prodigious effort, she stood erect, her old self. "But come, the time for talking is past. Now is the time for action". They hastened from the chamber, drawing on steel gauntlets as they went.

Braban, on the tower, heard their approach and turned. "My lady?".

"See you yon flame?".

"Ay, I see it. I also see that". He pointed north. There was a glow at Echyngham but as Elizabeth commented drily, sandstone does not burn too well. But further over, the timbered Shoyswell Manor was a column of fire in the night. "The men of Tyshurst move quickly" he growled.

"A bad business, Robert".

"Ay, a bad business". He gazed fixedly over the countryside towards Salehurst. Meg watched him, not without sympathy. They had Ursula in common.

"Ursula de Ukkefeld will be dead, Robert".

He did not answer, then he chuckled, and she thought he had gone mad with grief. "I think not, my lady..... will you not harken?".

They listened in silence. "I hear nothing, Robert" Margaret's voice reflected her doubt.

"But I do". Elizabeth leaned over the battlement, straining her ears to catch again she thought she had heard. "There" she cried jubilantly, "heard you not that?".

"Ay, ay" Margaret cried excitedly, "a horse forded the stream down the valley. Just one horse. You can hear it more clearly now".

"Which horse" muttered the squire, "I will go bail is ridden by Mistress de Ukkefeld".

"Can it be?". Margaret's disbelief struggled with hope for her lover's safety. "Miracles do therefore happen".

"We shall soon know".

They stood, hearts beating quickly, eyes fixed on the blackness of the night, straining their ears to catch the least sound. The stillness somehow accentuated the terror implicit in the patches of flame against the inky sky. Now the horse was perfectly audible; it as well as its rider was heavily armoured, all this could be heard. It came closer until it stopped below where they stood above the drawbridge.

"Holloa! Castle ho!".

Braban touched the chatelaine's arm. "You command, my lady".

"Who calls?".

The rider laughed in relief. "Is't you, Meg? In God's name, lower the drawbridge. We are all in dire peril this day".

Braban roared the necessary order and they clattered down the spiral stairs to the courtyard. There, in the light shed by the guttering torches, they waited while the portcullis rose with agonising slowness. As the horse passed beneath the gateway the light reflected dully in the bronzed armour.

Margaret ran forward, then recoiled as the rider raised her visor. The white face that blinked in the sudden glare was indeed that they knew but it was face that no longer reflected the happy, not to say frivolous disposition for which she was known. "Ay, it is me, yet it is not me". She swung to earth. "When you have seen your uncle slain before your eyes, you will likewise age".

For a moment they stood in stunned silence, then Braban snapped an oath. "They killed the Vicar.....your uncle?".

"Before his altar. We were praying. I had asked him to ride with me. He refused to leave his flock, but bade me go in God's name. I was as you see me, ready to ride, when they burst in at the west door. Sir William went to meet them, to give me time to escape as I suppose, when Haswell, the smith, struck him down with an axe".

In a strangled voice, Braban asked her how she had escaped.

"As good luck would have it, my horse was at the south door. I fled and rode. Thought of seeking sanctuary for the night with Abbot Giles at St. Martin's. Then, as I crossed the river, I heard much shouting. The men of Rothersbridge marched on the abbey".

Margaret looked at Elizabeth. Roger was at the abbey. Oh God, she thought, what if..... Elizabeth's frown brought her to control. Her face assumed impassivity.

"What then?"

"I drew my sword and cut my way through them" she stated simply. Then, seeing Braban's face, she smiled. "No courage was involved. They were taken by surprise". Everyone knew of course that it was not quite that simple. On impulse, she drew her blade. "See, here is my sword with peasant blood on it".

Braban motioned Wat Cruttenden to take the horse, then he smiled at her: "Sir Roger would be proud of his friend, were he at home". She looked at him, startled, then she sank onto the keep stairs with a groan of despair.

"Roger from home? My God, then we are lost, sure".

Margaret gripped her arm savagely. "Be not so chicken-hearted before the men. Have you no pride? Come to my chamber".

She turned on her heel and walked up the stairway, and she did not look back. Ukkefeld rose listlessly and followed her. Braban permitted himself a half-smile. That one was a soldier to her finger tips. Elizabeth, seeing his face, smiled also. "In my sister, blood-pride becomes a virtue it would seem".

He nodded gravely. "A fine spirit, my lady".

"Must it always be 'my lady'? 'Twas Elizabeth, I mind, or Bess. Can it not be so again, Robert?".

"If it is your wish.....Elizabeth".

So speaking they reached the chamber, tapestried and well appointed after the fashion of the time.

Ursula was to recover some of her spirit under Lady Margaret's impassioned harangue. Braban stroked his beard and watched with obvious admiration.

"Lost! Lost quotha!" the chatelaine began indignantly. "Roger is a great warrior, no doubt, but his lady is also of warrior stock. Think you I will allow my home - my home, do you hear? - to be burned around my ears? Harken to me, Ursula de Ukkefeld, timid as you are. In Roger's absence I command her. This very morn I gave judgement in the great hall and this night I don full armour to protect my home and lands from.....you know what as well and better than I do. And you prattle of us being lost. Lost indeed! Am I not Margaret of Glottingham, and do I not stand here in my lord's place? Think you I will wilt before the necessity of leading my men into battle?".

"Well said". Elizabeth drained her wine to her sister, eyes twinkling.

Margaret glared at her. "You jest, do you, my sister? So be it. Jest away. But you and I will lead the soldiers into battle. Were I to suggest differently you would hold me in contempt, and rightly".

Elizabeth was immediately serious. "It is as you say, sister. 'Tis as our respected father said, position implies not only privilege but responsibilities, too. And it must be so, even if we fall at the first exchange".

Braban stirred himself. "And 'tis not as bad as Mistress Ursula imagines. We have here good fighting men. The castle is full of them. Not only our own men, but the men of Echyngham and Munfield and the outlying manors, who have been coming in all day. And I speak not of Mistress Alard's men of Winchelsea. Moreover, Glottingham is not easy to storm. And you all have good armour that will turn aside a shrewd blow. We have little cause for despair, it seems to me".

Ursula smiled faintly. "There is no fear in me, Robert. A lady of family does not fear the rabble. Yet I have seen mine uncle struck down and my spirit is afflicted".

"He was a good man".

"And a gentle one too" supplemented Bess. She thought back over the years. She could not remember when he had not been priest at Salehurst.

A thick silence folded down, as they sat, each busy with their private thoughts. From far below came the faint sound of hammering on steel, as the armourer went about his business by torchlight into the sultry, summer night.

Then, about two in the morning, Boxhull returned. Margaret lifted her head as the horses clattered into the courtyard below, and the shouted orders reached her ears. Lifting her head likewise, Elizabeth saw the granite impassivity of her sister's face, and smiled approvingly. It remained like a rock until he strode into the chamber; then, fleetingly, it was touched with something softer.

In answer to her question, Boxhull nodded: "Trouble, wife? Ay, some. But then, as I have heard tell, man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward". He sat down heavily at the board, reaching automatically for the wine. To Ursula he said gently: "Know about your uncle. I am sorry. You are welcome here, all I have is yours".

Margaret nodded her approval. "What occurred? You spoke of trouble".

"Saw Abbot Giles". His gaze enveloped them all as he started his tale. "Halle was right. Abbot heard me out, without interest. Under-estimated the danger, offered me wine. Then one came running, saying the Vicarage at Salehurst over the river was fired. Could see it, anyhow, from the abbot's chamber". Ursula's head sunk low, and two tears hovered like jewels on the eyelids. Braban glanced at her, then ostentatiously stared at his wine. "Then we heard a rumble, like a summer storm. Yet it was not a storm". A kind of corporate sigh sounded in the chamber. He drank deep before continuing. "'Twas the men of High Ridge and Salehurst, as I judge. Then we heard more shouting, this time from the direction of the village. It was the men of Rothersbridge, marching to join the others at the abbey. When it was too late, the Abbot understood the extent of the danger".

Margaret's eyes were wide. "What did you do?"

"Peace, there is more. Above the shouting, from the direction of Salehurst we heard the sound of horses hooves. They were hollow on the bridge, coming fast. 'Twas Ursula" he explained.

She looked up, smiling through tears. "You saw?"

"I saw. By this time the men of Rothersbridge were between Ursula and the abbey" explained the knight, looking around at his auditors. "Expected to see her torn from the saddle and slain before my eyes. Could not have helped. My heart was in my mouth".

Faintly, Ursula admitted: "I too feared".

"Did not show it, then".

Braban urged him on. "And then?"

"She did not hesitate. Drew her sword and hacked her way through. 'Twas bravely done, by the Mass! Suddenly they broke and she was through. Then she vanished into the woods and I saw her no more. I guessed where she was bound".

Bess smiled fondly at the lady. "Oh, well done! Would I had been at your side".

Boxhull frowned at the tapestried wall. "Ay, 'twas a brave deed". Gallantly, he added: "Knollys could have done no better".

Margaret enjoyed her lover's embarrassment. "But what happened at the abbey?"

"The mob came on. They howled at the abbey gate, calling that the abbot should go out to them. He was all of a twitter, but he went. After his fashion, he is a brave man. They demanded that the rent rolls should be brought out and burned. He came back asking what to do. I told him to bend to the wind if he valued his life and those of the brothers at more than a groat apiece. So the rolls were burned in the road. Then the abbey servants trundled out casks and the men drank to the damnation of John of Gaunt". He guffawed.

"They even forced the abbot to drink to the early death of the Archbishop of Canterbury".

"Did he do it?" Braban wanted to know.

"Would not you? He drank with a will".

"How unseemly" Margaret thought.

"How sensible" he corrected, "'tis no time to be inflexible. Then, in high good humour, they moved off along the road to Glottingham, singing and boasting how they would wring my neck and slay the Echyngham whore".

Elizabeth's face darkened at the insult, her eyes hot as fire.

"No word as to me" Margaret prompted, "tell it all, husband".

With grim humour, Boxhull remarked: "Did hear something about my brach having her heart torn out. Might have been mistaken".

She knew he was not. Her eyes locked with Ursula's in fury.

"Content you, Meg" Ursula smiled, "at least one peasant woman is manless this night. And his brood fatherless".

Boxhull chose to ignore the hate that dripped from her tongue. "We then moved off towards Rothersbridge. Had no trouble. 'Twas deserted, only women and children. We took the Lewes road, then followed the valley way to Glottingham".

"And the mob?"

"They lie in the woods this night".

There was silence for a Paternoster-while before the significance of the remark broke over them. Then Braban sat up straight: "You mean they attack in the morn?"

"Ay". Boxhull was grim as he nodded. "So it behoves us to do what we may. 'Twill not be easy". His eyes came to rest on his sister-in-law. "And those who have sins to confess had best do so".

Conscious of her red face, Elizabeth was short with him: "I am in a state of grace".

"'Tis well. Then we had best snatch a few hours sleep". He rose. "We have a long and doubtless bloody day on the morrow. For myself, I am to the chapel for a while".

He was halfway across the room when there came a discreet tap at the door, and came Kate Cralle, in mail, fair hair tightly coiled on her head, looking white but determined. Margaret was ashamed of herself. Since Bess's arrival she had seen little of Kate, and yet they were friends. She crossed to her, arms outstretched: "Why, Kate" she murmured, kissing her, "what would you?"

Cralle smiled weakly at Boxhull, begging his pardon for the interruption. He nodded, wonderingly. She turned to her mistress. "Meg, I would be part of the action this day".

Soothingly, almost condescendingly, came the instinctive reply: "'Twould be safer in the chapel with the other women, Kate".

"You insult me, Meg" returned Cralle, with some heat. "I am a gentlewoman".

"Why, 'tis so". Margaret glanced at her man. "What say you?"

"Why not, if she has a mind to it".

"Kate, dearest Kate" murmured Margaret, softly, "is it your heart bids you do this thing?"

Bess, who knew her not, regarded her keenly, assessing her, as women will, to the furthest reaches of her soul. She smiled, a trifle superciliously. Scared as a goose in November was her judgement. Nor was she far wrong.

"Nay, 'tis fear, Meg. I would put mine shoulder to the wheel. If the day goes against us, you know well what fate awaits me. Rape and then a slit throat". She shuddered. "More fitting to die sword in hand".

The reasoning was sound. Meg kissed her tenderly. "An' 'tis so, go and arm yourself completely. Master Braban will squire you, will you not, Robert?"

"With a will".

After they had left the chamber, Roger grunted: "She any good, Meg?"

"Not in my belief". She remembered well the journey to Bayonne and the never-ending complaints. "But if she can kill one or two before she is slain, 'twill be a help, ay?"

"You are a hard woman" he grinned.

"Nay, just realistic".

He went from them and Ursula coughed. "You do her an injustice I think.....mayhap. Have seen her watching us in practice. You may be surprised in her. She is affeared, but greatly. Thus will she fight with despair".

"And you, Ursula?"

Ukkefeld gave a laugh that was not a laugh. "Fear not for me, Meg. I shall fight with hate".

Then, being hardy souls, they slept. For Braban, after arming Cralle, and seeking Boxhull, put his head in the door, to see Margaret, wrapped in a cloak, asleep on the floor, Elizabeth stretched out on the settle and Ursula, head on arms, at the table. Braban grinned appreciatively and went away softly. Unlike Boxhull, he did not despise them. He believed they would sell their lives very expensively indeed, and no man could ask more of them than that.

So it was that Boxhull went to the chapel. Although a soldier, it was the place he loved best of all, for in it, it seemed to him, there were few considerations of rank and position. He knelt with his men to receive the Blessed Sacrament, for the church unified all. This pleased him for in it he saw the essential truth that all men are brothers and that no matter how high a man's rank on earth might be, before the Almighty all men were the same. It grieved him that men had temporarily forgotten this truth.

The chapel was dark, lit by only one lamp above the altar, and before it Father Matthew knelt at his devotions. For him it had been a busy day, for peasants and soldiers alike had set their spiritual house in order. Boxhull had himself been shrived early in the day and came now but for the consolation of prayer. He knelt at the rear of the chapel, staying thus for a long time. It was thus that he did not see his chaplain until he stood over him.

"You wish to see me, my son?"

"Nay, I came but to be near the Body of Our Lord. This night I have much need of His Presence".

Matthew Tunstall nodded understandingly and was silent for some seconds, regarding his earthly lord steadily. Then: "You are worried, my son?"

"I have reason".

"You have reason. Yet you know what must be done".

Boxhull stared his surprise, saying nothing.

The priest went on: "Come, Sir Roger, this is not like you. You have been trained to arms from a boy as is proper for one in your station. You have fought all over Europe".

"Ay, I have fought my country's enemies".

"And not only your country's enemies, I think, but also the enemies of whosoever paid you".

"You taunt me with that?"

"By no means. The profession of soldier-of-fortune is not wrong. I merely meant that it ill suits you to worry about traitorous rebels".

All amazed, the knight laughed bitterly: "On your lips that sounds strange indeed. Have you not spoken against people in my station?"

Tunstall reddened. "I have indeed spoken out against injustice, and shall always do so. The Grossers I have lambasted, as also the sinful dalliance of the Court". There was a pause, before he went on in a lower key. "A priest has this duty. It may be this is why I yet lack a parish. No matter, I cannot hold my tongue when I see evil. But never have I failed to give credit to you. You are a good lord and the people you protect this day are good people. I have never preached that men should take up sword and bill against you, my son, nor ever would. Did you not pay the Poll Tax yourself for all your people? Have you not sought to undo your father's ill deeds?"

"It may be, Father. I do not dispute your right to make injustice the subject of your sermons. I have sat under you many moons and have not complained". He eyed his

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"It may be, Father. I do not dispute your right to make injustice the subject of your sermons. I have sat under you many moons and have not complained". He eyed his

chaplain grimly. "But your homilies have roused the peasants. It may be that my people will not rise but others will. The men of Salehurst, High Ridge, of Dallington, of Echyngham no doubt will. They cannot be expected to distinguish between this and another manor. Nor will they. Another pea from the same pod they will say, and to justify themselves they will say that they have Father Matthew's word for it that all the lords and their wenches are no more than rips and rascals, whores and wantons. On the day they attack, Father, they may spare you. They will not spare my wife or myself".

"They are incensed against the Echyngham family and with justice". Tunstall muttered, rebelliously.

"Hark you, reverend Father" came the harshly angry retort, "my lady is a member of that family and I bid you beware where you ramble in your discourse with me". The priest found Boxhull's loyalty to his lady quite delightful, given the circumstances. "I give you great license in your utterances which you scarce seem to appreciate. What you say may be true but 'tis not for you to say it". He closed his mouth with a snap lest he say something which he would afterwards regret, for he liked the man. They glowered on each other for some time before Boxhull forced a lop-sided grin to his face. "Well, look not upon me so grimly man. I am for you, but for my skin's sake could wish you other than you are".

"As God made me. Never been mealy-mouthed. No intention of starting now".

Boxhull looked at him with irritation. "That plaguey temper will be the finish of you, Father. Mend it". Then, deftly changing the subject: "When the attack comes, as come it will, bring all the women and children here and see to them. Can even preach to them" he added drily, "though I think enough damage has been done".

"Rising not all my fault. Men would have risen with me. Well organised and thorough paced rising. Give me too much credit".

Boxhull grinned. "Ay, I know. Cannot be mended now, either way. All we can do is to fight and trust God to pull our lives out of the fire".

Hesitantly, the priest suggested: "Could strike a blow myself, Sir Roger".

"A man of God? Keep to thine appointed task, Father. Leave the hard knocks to others".

"Did not Abbot Hamo of Battle repulse the French within the memory of all men, to the saving of the town of Winchelsea?".

Boxhull grinned appreciatively at his chaplain. "Hamo of Offyngton was not Matthew Tunstall. A mitred abbot may do what a chaplain may not. For the offer I thank you, but I have need of you here". His hand swept around the darkened chapel. "Besides, your hand has no martial cunning. Would you be spitted like a lark?".

They smiled at each other, with an affection born of a lifetime's knowledge. Tunstall stared at the knight's harness, admiring its strength. Then he bethought him. "The ladies came to me to be shriven, armed as for war. You intend to use them?".

"Needs must". He saw Tunstall's lips purse. "You disapprove?".

"I do, but do not imagine that will affect you".

"You are unreasonable, Father".

"I am not unreasonable. This is not work apt for women".

Here it is again, Boxhull thought. The gulf between the nobility and peasant stock. It was unbridgeable. Yet, because the priest was an old friend, he tried. "In the normal way, no" conceded Boxhull, patiently. "You mentioned my station not long since. I do stand high among my people. I have responsibilities to others. The ladies also stand high. Elizabeth and Ursula are unmarried, holding their manors in their own hands. They have a duty to defend them".

"And Lady Margaret?".

"She brought Glottingham to me as a marriage portion. 'Twas her manor and 'tis her jointure. 'Tis right that she should defend it".

"And to be slain?".

"Assuredly, if necessary. That is understood. Position implies duties as well as privilege". Then he grinned. "You know well that Lady Margaret is happier with a sword in her hand".

"An unheard of thing" protested the cleric.

"Unusual, but not unheard of. I mind well that soon after Chandos died at Mortemer, we attacked a castle, much like this. The lord was from home. The lady of the house gave us defiance, would not surrender".

"And what occurred?".

"Patience, you shall hear. She spared us nothing, arrows, molten lead, boulders. She overturned one of our ladders herself and when we gained entry to the keep, she died fighting amongst her men".

"Horror!".

"Ay, indeed. War is like that". Boxhull spoke quietly. "Yet she chose the path she would tread, a conscious decision of a brave heart. She would not have her life spared. 'Afore God, Father, I gave her a chance to live, even though I were sick to the heart with the deaths of my good fellows. Three times I called upon her to surrender. I am not a cruel man. I would gladly have spared her the tomb that day. I mind it well". His voice sank even lower as his mind raced back over the years. "Ay, I mind it well. She stood there with the pitiful remnant of her force, leaning on her sword with very weariness. There was a thick trickle of blood from her neck across her breastplate. One of our arrows had pierced the aventail and from the way she reeled, I thought for sure 'twas all over. Yet like an Amazon of old, she plucked the shaft from her neck and fought on. Her harness was hacked and my archers had their bows drawn back. The end was very near. There was nowhere she could run, she or her men, for they had their backs against the keep wall. I offered her honourable treatment. She laughed scornfully. 'Ay, sir, honourable treatment? As at Limoges? Ask the ladies of Limoges, ay, and the men too, what honourable treatment we

may expect from the English'. I was angered but she spoke true. Had she surrendered, I would have enjoyed her that night and slit her gizzard in the morning. I am a soldier, not a saint. She did well not to surrender". Boxhull stopped short of saying that that was his standard practice when a gentlewoman fell into his hands. He was famous for it, so that most noble ladies took care not to fall alive into his hands.

Tunstall feared to prompt him, yet he timidly asked: "And then, Sir Roger?"

"And then?". Boxhull stared up at him, surprised that anyone could doubt what happened. "Why, we charged and she died bravely among her men".

"You killed her.....yourself, I mean?"

"As mutton, Father, as mutton. She was a lady any man would be proud to call wife. For a wench, she fought well, strongly".

"The strength of despair".

"Mayhap. Yet it is not difficult to die when you know you have to. I beat her to her knees, but she staggered up again. Then I smashed through her body armour and she died at my feet without fuss, like a knight". There was a deathly silence, broken only by the priest's prayer; then he signed himself. Boxhull watched with a mocking smile. Civilians were easily shocked. "Pray for her an' you list, Father. She was a brave wench, who knew the duties of rank. Margaret knows this, as do Elizabeth and Ursula". He laughed. "And so, it seems, does Kate Cralle, though 'tis hard to believe".

The chaplain shook his head. "I approve not. These are strange paths you would have the ladies tread".

"So must it be. I need every sword".

With that Tunstall had to be content. He knew Boxhull's inflexibility of old. Moreover, he was a peasant by birth and the pre-occupation of the nobility with honour had always appeared to him ludicrous in the extreme. This was a gulf which the two men had signally failed to bridge. So they left the matter where it was.

Boxhull rose, yawning. "If Braban seeks me, Father, I am on the west tower. I would have words with him. See to it, I charge you. And now it is me for some night air".

It was something after three when Braban found the knight on the west tower, back against the wall, sleeping in untroubled fashion. He was a light sleeper and woke at once. Braban sank down beside him. "Reminds me of other nights, this".

Boxhull grunted. "I'm a worried man, Robert. Oh, 'tis not a siege I mind - God knows, I've seen enough. It is not a battle I mind, if it comes to that. We are no strangers to total war, you and I. 'Tis the material I have to work with. Women.....". Braban laughed but said nothing. "What I need is good fighting men. There is you, very well. There is John Knelle, by all accounts an expert man. There is Busbridge, Bess's man; well, he looks a good

soldier too. Then there is Alard's man, Jordan. Mayhap he can be relied on. And where is Ursula's man, Thomas Conghurst? He rode not in with her. Probably dead.....or gone over to the peasants. So what have I got to work with? Women.....".

"Mayhap you estimate them not at their true worth?"

"I say nothing of Margaret, Elizabeth or Ursula. They will fight, and will die well, if called upon. They have been so bred up. But the Cralle woman now. Does not even have a squire. A frivolous bit, that. Useless. What is your opinion? You have just armed her".

"For Cralle, I fear you may be right. She was all of a twitter, laughing without cause, breathless, leg muscles jerking uncontrollably".

"Battle nerves!"

"'Tis true".

"And you wonder I am worried? Would we were back in France with iron men at our back, and not in this hornet's nest".

"Wishing will not make it so".

"'Tis true, friend Robert. We have reached the end of our rope. And what makes me the angrier is that the women will insist on leading the men, if it comes to a battle. That is, if Halle rides to our aid. If he does not, God help us, that is all. Ay, they will insist on leading men, and I cannot deny them because of their rank. They have only read of war in the chronicles and think it is anybody's game. You have seen their belligerence. Brave words, i'faith! Will it be backed up by brave deeds? It may not be. Yet they are our natural leaders! Would that they would ride at rear! But can you see it? Nor can I, my friend".

Braban thought he was being unfair, was Boxhull. If it came to a tight corner, he would be proud to have the ladies beside him. But his friend was always like this. He was much given to saying he was not a cruel man, yet his cruelty was proverbial, coldly ruthless. Men followed him because he had a nose for plunder and thought much of their wellbeing. But he was a brutal, conscienceless killing machine, knowing no other way. Braban coughed. "Mayhap.....".

"Mayhap me no mayhaps! You know well what I say is true. If only they knew the brutality of war as we know it. And civil war is worse than anything. 'Tis a mess, Robert, a God awful mess".

"Why, 'tis so. Yet Lady Margaret and Mistress Ursula rode through France to Bayonne. I'll remember it always".

"Always may not be long" Boxhull growled. "They were lucky, let me tell you. My flesh creeps at the thought of it".

"Well, well.....".

"Tell me, Robert. Would our honour survive the leaving of them to their own devices?"

Used as he was to Boxhull's ruthlessness, his dedication to survival, Braban opened his mouth in astonishment. "You cannot be serious, Sir Roger!"

"Am I not?"

"She.....Margaret, that is.....is your wife".

"Can get another wife; cannot get another life".
Braban said nothing. "We made a compact, you and I, when we went soldiering, never to defend an indefensible post, to void the field when defeat stared us in the face. We are mercenaries, you and I, not paladins".

"Ay.....but she is your lady! Did you never love her?".

"Nay, not I. I wed her but to get Glottingham, just as you will wed Ursula to get High Ridge". The statement floored Braban. "That is a fate from which I hope to spare you, the wench being as she is. And forget not, Robert, 'tis nought to you if she drops this day. The effect is the same. She is the last of her line. The lease falls to the ground, with her".

The cold logic made Braban shiver. In spite of himself he admitted. "'Twould be best if she were not so superbly equipped".

"True, 'tis a fine harness. Yet she seeks Haswell with passion: It cannot be that she will survive such an encounter. Hast seen the man?".

Braban had. In a strangled voice he asked: "You have a plan for our survival, Sir Roger?".

"Somewhat of a plan. The Glottinghams, who built this castle, thought of most things, including escape. It went up in the time of De Montfort, when one never knew what the future held. Remember, trouble came as close as Lewes. As you know, the land drops sharply to the west. No attack can come that way. Now, in the dungeon is a slab which, when removed, reveals what seems to be an oubliette. Yet 'tis not. Margaret's father told me the secret of 't the night afore we wed. I thought it not meet to tell Meg all" he grinned. "So it behoves me to yet keep my counsel".

Braban wanted to live, but he was not sure if he wanted to live in such a scurvy way, and said so.

Boxhull laughed, derisively. "When the time comes, if it comes, you will crawl with me down that passage, friend Braban, I know it".

"You think so?".

"I know so. You'll think on High Ridge and follow me". The trouble was, Braban knew it too.

"But your own lady.....". It was a last expiring gasp of conscience, and Boxhull chuckled.

"Wenches are not a rare commodity, Robert. Think on't. Once you are landed again, you'll find a breeder of sons easy enough. Now get you to sleep and dream of the lush acres of High Ridge".

"And it may not even be necessary" muttered the drowsy squire.

"As you say, not even necessary".

The real tragedy was that below, wrapped in her cloak, the Lady Margaret, steeped in the chivalric notions in which she believed so nobly, dreamed of a knightly death at the side of her lord, fighting to the last against impossible odds. Betrayal was not a thought built into her brain.

While she dreamed of noble deeds, as had her ancestors, most of her contemporaries had their eye on the main chance. The truth was that feudalism, of which she was so true an exemplar, was breaking down into something less worthy. And just as she represented the old values, the new ones were enshrined in the total lack of honour and morality exhibited by her husband.

Lady Margaret slept not long. Shortly before dawn she awoke, somewhat refreshed. Yawning silently, she rose quietly, making little noise. She saw that Elizabeth still slept but that Ursula's large blue eyes were open and met hers. It was too much. Meg whispered: "Come" and the lady rose, smiling, obeying her. Outside they carefully stepped over sleeping men and reached the dark chapel. Margaret took her in her arms and they made the tenderest tactile love. They had lain aside gorgets, bascinets and gauntlets for the night and smooth skin united in passionate embrace. For all Margaret knew, she would fall that day and as she lay on the hard ground, in the agony of death, she would have the memory of their love to sustain her.

It was pitch black in the chapel, anonymous and comforting, and their passion had no witnesses. They clung to each other, sighing and gasping in worship of each others bodies, both savouring limb-dissolving ecstasy. It gave them the strength to face what they knew must be. The sound of Margaret's long spurs, as her steel heels beat a convulsive tattoo on the flags, clinked loudly, slashing through the silence. Hearing it, Ursula laughed softly, happy in her power over the tall, splendid lady.

Of their endearments, of sweet breath composed, we have nothing to do. The ear of history remembers only their whispered, loving probing, as to what the day would hold for them both.

Margaret took Ursula's hand, pressing it to her lips. "Sweetheart, are you affeared?".

"Why, Meg, have I not proved myself?".

"You know well I mean if our relief arrives, if Halle rides to our aid. If he does not, 'tis no matter. If he does, we make sortie. It will be brutal, kill or be killed. I ask again, are you affeared?".

"Nay.....mayhap a little".

"By the Saints! They are but traitorous dogs".

"But dogs who are trained to arms from the age of fifteen, as law provides".

"That makes you affeared?".

"Does it not you?".

"Nay, not a whit".

"Ah, but" Ursula sighed, "you are Margaret de Boxhull".

"And you are Ursula de Ukkefeld. What then?".

"You are a warrior lady, born to it".

"You too fight well. Did I not train you?"

"I am well enough, thanks to you".

"More than well enough, dearest. And you will lead the Winchelsea men. Jane's".

"If it is so ordered".

"And you have a quarrel to settle, have you not?"

"Ay, I will kill Haswell, or he me".

"Talk not so" Margaret whispered, fiercely. "It may not be. You are superbly equipped, and gallant I know".

"But he may, dearest Meg. 'Tis true I have protection. But he has great strength".

"You are strong too".

"But he is an ox, a bloody ox".

"Then put him in the shambles, where he belongs".

"I will try, or lay on the ground for it".

"You will triumph".

"Ay, come what may, I will triumph".

"And remember, my own one, it is not the falling that matters, but the manner of the fall".

"I know it, and will die bravely. And as my eyes grow dark, I will think of you, my love".

Margaret, greatly moved, kissed her hungrily in the dark. Then Ursula whispered languorously: "I love you, Meg, so very much. It was always so. Do you remember Bayonne, nay, Brest, was it not? I promise you that if I drop today, my last thought shall be of you. And I will wait for you on the other side". Then, as Meg would have spoken, she placed her finger on her lips. "Nay, interrupt me not, my love. Now harken. I have made my Will. All is yours. It is in the place you wot of, and only you. 'Tis in the secret chamber, our place of love. Rest easy, the dogs will not find it, they have not the wit. Now, dearest Meg, kiss me once more and let us make an end, for, as I hear, the castle stirs. God help us all, for we have much to do this day".

Returning to the chamber they found Elizabeth on her feet, in bascinet and gauntlets, patiently awaiting them. Elizabeth guessed, nay, she knew; and watched as her sister armed Ursula with obvious signs of love and tenderness. It both repelled her, and attracted her. The love that she gave to men, Meg gave to this woman. She watched Meg gently push back an errant strand of fair hair that escaped from Ursula's arming cap, then slide the bascinet over her head. Then she affixed the cunningly fashioned gorget and fastened it at the rear. Elizabeth greatly admired this refinement, which Meg also wore. Deeper at front and back than at the sides, it completely covered the aventail; Elizabeth recognised it as a complete protection for the neck. It was Meg's own design, for in 1381 it was not standard but Elizabeth decided that if she lived through this day, she too would add such to her armoury, even as she would the fluted circular plates that protected the armpits, where the glimpse of mail between breastplate and the arm plates was an attraction to every archer. While Ursula serviced Marga-

ret in like manner, Elizabeth studied them at leisure. Her sister's face had a roseate hue and she sounded as if her breathing was shallow, while Ursula's eyes looked even larger than usual and luminous. Elizabeth judged, quite rightly, that beneath their harness the women's nipples were like iron, and that the passage of love had been cruel.

Elizabeth closed her visor with a steel hand. The sound seemed to recall them to the present. In a thick voice Margaret asked how she did, clapping her on the shoulder. Elizabeth answered: "Well enough", trying to keep a bubble of amusement out of her voice.

Together they ascended to the battlements to meet the rigours of the day. Boxhull and Braban were already there, as also Kate Cralle and the archers lining the walls. Boxhull turned, hearing them coming, and grunted: "I sought you in vain. Where were you? 'Tis not like you, Meg, to be late for a fight. But no matter, the enemy waited on your coming!".

On being told they had been in the chapel, he said no more, innocently believing they had been a-praying, but Elizabeth turned aside, lest he should see her mocking smile. Could it really be, she asked herself, that Boxhull was so easily deceived. If he believed that excuse, he would truly believe anything.

9TH JUNE, 1381

DAY

The first streaks of light spread over the Weald, revealing Glattingham Castle silent but manned at every point by steel-capped archers and men-at-arms. Behind them stood those who, as befitted their rank and position, were in complete armour. The castle was armed and ready for what the day held in store. For the moment all was still and silence reigned, except for Giles Ford, the archer, cursing this early rising and consigning anyone and everyone to the fiery pit. Wat Cruttenden took a sidelong glance at his comrade.

"Had we as many men-at-arms as you have oaths at your beck, we'd be invincible, surely".

Giles snarled something into his beard and re-strung his longbow. Wat grinned.

Robert Braban whistled an air, for to him this was an old story. One attack is much like another. The three ladies stood together, the arms of their families emblazoned on their jupons. Bess was serene, motionless, speaking very occasionally to Ursula. Margaret leaned against the stone battlement, shielding her eyes against the sun's rays, gazing intently at the mass of woodland that surrounded them, far too close for comfort. Similarly equipped to her mistress, but more timid, Kate Cralle stood back, vainly trying to quell the quivering of her leg muscles.

"Looks like another hot day" Braban commented. Boxhull gazed up at his banner; there was no movement in it. Even as he did so he saw his wife start and clap her left hand to her sword. In two strides he was by her side.

"See you aught?". For answer she pointed a steel hand at the hillside.

"Ay, sunlight glints on steel". He looked and, where the woods briefly thinned, he too saw it. Then it was gone. Some minutes later, nearer to the castle, a flock of rooks rose screeching into the sky. "You made a right judgement, Roger. They attack today".

"Like enough". He still watched. Between the castle and the woods was a quarter of a mile of open country. As yet, not a blade of grass stirred. Then, somewhere nearby, a horn sounded clearly in the crisp quiet of dawn. At its sound, the woods seem to spew forth men, and in a short space of time the land between was black with men. Running towards them was a host of peasants brandishing bills and axes, bows and swords, a shouting concourse of angry men.

Cralle gave a strangled gasp and believed herself lost. Braban grinned as he saw her sign herself. A poor creature, he thought, gutless.

Boxhull had indeed been right. They had lain in the woods all night, a frightening degree of organisation. He saw the giant forms of Dan Foster and Will Haswell and did not doubt that they were the driving force behind such an assembly of malcontents. And he hoped with all his being that his messenger, despatched from the abbey the previous evening, had reached Halle; and also that Hastings ~~was~~ peaceful.

Braban, reading his thoughts, muttered: "If it comes to the worst, we have the passage to fall back on. Or we can break out. Some of us will survive". Boxhull merely looked at him.

The ladies gazed at the peasants, reacting after their different natures.

"Cowardly vermin" cried Ursula, passionately, her left hand groping for her sword. "When I get among you, you will wish yourself back in your filthy hovels".

Roger did not comment, making allowances, but he exchanged a look with his squire. "All visors closed" he ordered, "unless you would follow Jane Alard". His gaze encompassed them all as they obeyed him. He would no longer be able to see Ursula's hate-contorted face, and that was all to the good. And yet, as Braban never tired of telling him, it was a more than comely face. But when his sister-in-law spoke her thoughts he could not resist a reply. She had walked forward to gaze down at the rebels, supremely disdainful of the arrows that clattered harmlessly from her armour.

"They look like ravenous animals" she opined, in much the same tone as she would have discussed the latest sartorial fashion, politely interested, but aloof and dispassionate.

"A wild animal can tear you in half, Bess. And it is your flesh they are after".

The lady smiled to herself. Poor Roger! How worried he was, how much care of them he took. Did he not know that she cared not a whit whether she was torn to pieces or not? But she turned away from her exposed position.

Margaret had been quite still during this exchange, standing by her husband's elbow, gazing past her sister to the roaring mob below the walls. Her mouth was a thin line, could Roger but have seen it, and her eyes flashed. Secretly she agreed with Ursula, although she dared not say so. She had always found her husband's tenderness for the peasants bewildering and detestable. In her view, he was blind, wilfully blind, almost suicidally so. Boxhull was, then, suitably shocked when speaking from a heart full of anger, she almost snarled: "I hope to God they try escalate".

His reply was instinctive, born out of much experience. "You will see enough fighting before sunset without wishing more on us. Assuming you see sunset at all".

"That is the talk of a coward" she said, hotly, instantly appalled at what she had said, as if she feared that he would take the same action with her as he would had a man said the words.

"It is the talk of a wise man. Had you seen as much of war as I, you would not wish to see more. Ask Robert else". Good God, he thought, does she not know what the day will bring her? Why does she taunt me, of all men, with cowardice.

Braban knew that Boxhull would be sore and angry. Standing by the wall overlooking the courtyard, crowded with armed men, he slapped his hand against a stone merlon in vexation. "You heard what was said?". It was half a question, half a statement. "How can she say that to me? Does she not know why I am so fearful?".

Their association had never been that of knight and

squire, but as two friends of equal rank, and Braban answered with freedom: "In her heart, doubtless. But it is not with women as it is with us. You know that well. Anything that assaults their life is evil, anyone who does so must be crushed. Principles and ideals mean nothing to women".

Boxhull peered at him and grunted: "'Tis no wonder you remain unwed. If I knew women as well as you, wild horses would not have dragged me to the altar". He laughed bitterly. "We must forgive seemingly".

Braban smiled to himself. "And what now? What do we do?".

"Wait, 'tis all we can do". He turned, looking to where the ladies stood, braving arrows, looking down at the milling peasants. "Are they mad?" he grated, "I take a discharge when I must, not for pleasure. Whoever heard the like".

His squire chuckled. "'Tis as I say. A child does not know fear, thus he plays with fire. Women know not war, the pain of an arrow in the carcase. Thus, they take risks that you and I would shrink from, knowing as we do that the duty of a soldier is to take risks only when necessary".

"Well, get them away from there before one of them has her first experience of war".

Braban dutifully moved to do as he was bid, but even as he did so, an arrow struck Margaret's shoulder, spinning her round and sending her to her knees. She uttered an oath which in other, quieter times would have shocked him but now made him grin. It was straight from the guardroom. He dismissed the silver scar on her shoulder. Boxhull had started forward but seeing how things were, stopped. "Perhaps you will be more circumspect in future, wife" he growled, secretly enjoying her discomfiture. She muttered something which he chose not to hear. "Now, a Council of War. Robert asks what are we to do? I answer him again - wait. Time is on our side, not theirs".

Angrily, his lady flashed: "Are we not to venture forth against them?".

He gripped her arm. "Venture forth?". He laughed harshly. "Would you have us throw our lives away? Nay, let them pick holes in the walls with their finger nails and they list. It matters not. Had they siege engines the case would be altered".

Braban agreed. "Not to mention that Master Halle will ride to the rescue later in the day, if we can hold on till then".

"If his people do not rise" Boxhull corrected, "which is unlikely".

Ursula chafed under the necessity of doing nothing. With deep bitterness she cried: "Are we then to twiddle our thumbs? My uncle slain before his altar by that bastard Haswell, and I am not to flesh my sword?".

"Private quarrels are nought when the future of this land is at stake. Our task is to keep them busy here as long as we can, then.....".

A scream, high and shrill, cut through his words even as a hot knife through butter. They all rushed to the

wall overlooking the postern. The ladies cried out in horror. The postern gate stood wide open and before it Wat Cruttenden bent over a prostrate form.

"Wat.....in the name of God.....the gate" roared Braban frantically.

The grizzled old soldier turned and shouted up at them: "A traitor, now dead. I found him.....".

"Close the gate, dolt.....look to yourself..... behind you".

The courtyard below was suddenly full with shouting men-at-arms. Without an order they streamed to their comrade's aid, and none too soon. The peasants streamed into the castle through the open gate, the defenders meeting them with a clash of steel. Boxhull made for the stairs; quick as his reaction was, his wife's had been quicker and she it was who precipitated herself first towards the action she craved.

"You wanted blood, Meg" he shouted at the back of her bascinet, "I hope you are as brave in deeds as in words".

"You dishonour me with the question" she flung over her shoulder.

Boxhull grunted approvingly, sparing not a thought for Elizabeth and Ursula, hard on his heels. It was every man and woman for themselves. Had he had time to think, he would have realised that Kate Cralle was conspicuous by her absence.

The melee was fierce and bloody, no quarter being asked or given. Margaret fought savagely, as was her wont, in practice or in what she termed 'serious business'. This was serious business, without question. Elizabeth, the blue and silver arms of her house on her jupon, was singled out for furious onslaught. She knew it would be so, and her eyes, hard as Sussex flint, stared out at her enemies, those who would pull her down from her high place. They died where they stood, hacked down in blood by the bitch in whom, as all men agreed, Sir William de Echyngham lived again.

Ursula, drunk with revenge, was wild in her blows and paid the price. A flailing axe felled her, and as she pitched forward, unconscious, a sword smashed her to the ground. The fight raged over her body for some minutes; then the peasants broke, fleeing through the gate and swimming the moat to safety.

"Close that damned gate!" Boxhull shouted, lending his weight to the task. It was slammed shut and barred. He raised his visor, wiping the sweat from his face, and surveyed the body strewn ground. Some peasants yet lived. "See me an end to these traitors". It was speedily done.

He resisted the temptation to go to Ursula and turned instead to his men. Miraculously, only one serious casualty revealed itself. Young Harry Cruttenden, Wat's son, was on his knees, nursing his arm, wearing an anguished face. Truly his father's son, not a sound escaped him, but his eyes were dilated with pain. Boxhull crossed to him quickly. "How now, boy?" he enquired, gently. Inspecting the wound, he winced, for the boy's left arm had been cut to the bone and the flesh hung loose. His eyes jerked up to the father.

The tough old soldier grunted. "Seen worse". His eyes belied the statement. "He'll live, I reckon".

"See that he does. Have his hurt seen to". Then, not taking his eyes from the man, he added warmly: "Owe you much for this day's work, Wat. I'll not forget. Had you not settled that traitor.....".

"Done nought. My life was at stake too".

The old man helped his son away. Boxhull nodded his thanks to his men and then, and only then, turned to Ursula, still on her face. He exchanged a glance with Braban on whose face hope flickered like a newly lit fire. Boxhull frowned at him and concern replaced hope. That Braban hoped she would drop, Boxhull knew, but it was not policy to make it so obvious.

Margaret and her sister were pulling dead peasants from Ursula's body, then they turned her over and raised her visor. The eyes were closed. He looked down at his wife.

"Dead?".

Elizabeth smiled thinly, raising her sweat-streaked face, squinting against the sun. "'Tis only a blow on the head. Too eager to slay. A headache, no more".

Margaret agreed. "She fought without caution. And paid the price. I thought I had trained her better". She pointed to the scar on the bascinet and unceremoniously turning her over indicated the evidence of the blow across the shoulders. Neither had even dented the plate.

Boxhull nodded. "A glancing blow". To take this without scathe had the shape of the bascinet evolved. He called for water and under its embrace Ursula's eyes flickered open. She groaned. Margaret, lips twitching with humour, brushed aside a strand of hair from the steel ringed face. Ursula blinked in the sunlight and tried to sit up. Her eyes closed against the throbbing of her head.

"Take off her bascinet".

The order was disregarded. Braban felt his hand pushed aside. "Nay, nay, we have work to do". She struggled to her feet, swaying slightly. Braban lent her his arm. Nobody gainsaid her, least of all Boxhull, who knew the dire straits they were all in. She had, in any case, proved herself a useful sword, after all. He took his wife aside. "Will this make any difference to her?".

She looked at him as if he were mad. "To Ursula? You jest, husband, sure". She laughed. "What says Bess?".

There was a chink of steel as Elizabeth's shoulders lifted in an elegant shrug. "Ursula fears not death, seeks it mayhap. Comes from warrior stock, as do we". Her eyes locked with her sister's, who nodded vigorously. "'Twill more than a blow on the nog to crush Ursula".

He grunted. "'Tis well. And you, wife? You have no hurt? Or you, Bess?".

"Nay, not I" Margaret trilled, "Nor is Bess I swear".

Elizabeth smiled lazily. "Merely bruised. A joyous venture".

"Not too joyous" she was reminded, sourly. "Might have been slain. Still may be, we are in dire peril".

"It matters little" she replied, coolly. How could she explain to a man? And one, moreover, who could never understand, did not want to understand? Like most of his kind, he was unlettered and ignorant, a fighting animal. But she elected to try with him. "Today, tomorrow, years hence, in bed, in childbirth, in combat.....there is no whit of difference. I am ready, when it comes, as is Meg". The set of her mouth chilled him. "These men seek to take from me what my ancestors fought for and won with their swords. They shall not do so. Either they will die, or I will". As if talking to herself, she added softly: "And I shall glory in dying as by forebears did".

His eyes flickered to his wife's face and felt he was alone. They were hard women, he knew, always had known it. But such sublimity baffled him, mercenary that he was. Two peas from the same pod, he thought, as Margaret looked at her sister with pride. "Ay, that is how it is. You are our father's daughter. No craven blood. Sir William smiles on you from the grave".

He told them they were sick in the head and went from them with Braban. Placing a hand on his comrade's shoulder, he grunted: "Try not to let it show. You'll get High Ridge. She'll drop afore the sun sets, worry not. Am quite prepared to sacrifice all the women rather than our soldiers. And that one especially, for your sake".

Braban was bitter. "Have you seen her armour? Like Lady Margaret's - or should I say Alard's - has double plates on the left or blind side. These lightly armed fellows will make no impression on it. Only Haswell.....".

"Then content you. She seeks Haswell with passion. His club shall write finis to her undoubted valour".

"Yet, if she does not, am quite prepared to wed her". Boxhull laughed.

On the battlements again, they had other worries. Braban growled: "I like it not. They grow more. If there be not nigh on a thousand, I grow blind".

"There are many, that is certain". There was a long silence. Then: "Where is Ursula?".

Braban jerked a thumb behind him, where she sat on a stone, visor closed against a stray arrow, quite still, head bowed. "Like a damned rock herself, or with steel for a backbone".

"Will have words". He crossed to her. "How now?" he began cheerfully. "Might be worse, eh?".

The bronze head lifted. "Ay, Roger, as you say. My head still rings".

He chuckled. "You took a sore dunt, right enough. 'Tis a soldier's lot. An' you want to kill so much, must take the rough with the smooth".

"I complain not. Had not expected to be scatheless. Even expected death".

"Sought it, mayhap?".

"Mayhap. 'Tis better to die than be captured by those animals". She shuddered. "You know what is meant".

"Ay, 'tis known to me. But why seek death? Much to live for. Not a pleasant death. Think on't".

"'Tis to be presumed that I have thought. There are worse deaths than dropping in combat. At any event, it is better than dishonour. You heard what Bess said. 'Tis so. But you would not understand. You are a man".

He thought back to the Italian contessa whose throat he had slit after enjoying her. He had no conscience about his duplicity then, or now. He was a man raised in brutality, and rendered more so from his occupation. "I understand well enough. But there is one who wants you. If you care not for yourself, why not live for him?".

"Ah yes, poor Robert!". Her voice was low. "He is a good man and his eyes have followed me these many moons. But" she added, with the bitterness of a worldly-wise lady, "he loves me not. When he looks at Ursula, he sees acreage and messuages. It is natural. His father was wrong to lease his birthright away from him. If I live this thing through, I would be content to be his lady.....would he but speak".

Boxhull winced at her clarity of vision. "He will not speak".

"Why so?".

"He has nought to offer but his sword. He is landless. What would you?".

Amazed, she cried: "He would not be so silly!".

"It is not silly" he corrected her, gravely. "A man has his pride. And you are a wealthy heiress. The Ukkefeld lands are rich and wide. How could a soldier take to wife someone like Ursula de Ukkefeld, rich as a pepper-sack? Not to mention that you are a ward of the king".

"He has given scant thought to me in these troublous times" she murmured, idly fingering the jewelled dagger at her waist, "but he may, come the day. Ladies of family know well their bodies are for sale. But the king would agree to this match. I would see to it. I have friends at Court....".

"And if he should not?".

"Would go to the Tower rather than give my body to another. Robert deserves High Ridge. 'Tis his due".

Somewhat out of countenance, Boxhull chuckled: "Brave words!".

"There are brave deeds to back them".

For Boxhull, what the world called love was a matter of instant desire and quick fulfilment. Her display of high-minded generosity unnerved him. "Doubtless. Yet the king would never agree to a Royal Ward marrying a landless squire".

"That could be met. Boarzell has been on the market for over a year. Did think about buying it myself".

"Boarzell" Boxhull mused. "Badly run down from what I hear. Abuts on Elizabeth's land, a good neighbour. Ay, will speak to Robert about it. He has a goodly pile of nobles put by, or should have. He should leave it until after Lammastide. Price should have fallen by then. The men

of Boarzell have been sore abused".

She gripped his arm. "Ay, but speak not until the morrow. Remember, if I drop today, High Ridge returns to Robert anyway. I am the last of my line and the lease falls to the ground, with me".

This, of course, was what Robert hoped, but he could not very well say so. He reproved her for her cold-blooded words but even as he did so an archer came running, bearing a message from Braban that the peasants were attacking with deadly purpose.

Having failed to secure entry by the act of a traitor, they now sought victory by direct attack. The defenders watched in the heat of the morning while two trees were felled and trimmed. It was a grim sight. Even grimmer was the sight of hundreds of men making faggots. They worked, well beyond bowshot range, sweating and cursing in the heat, driven on by the giant form of the smith. Everyone knew that serious business had come at last.

"Assault!" growled Braban. "The faggots to fill the moat, the trees to smash down the postern gate".

Margaret, in awe, asked quietly: "Can they do it, think you?".

"They have weight of numbers on their side. We shall kill many of those lightly armed fellows, but ay, they will gain entry, come time". At this the lady clasped the hilt of her sword as an imp of womanly dread clawed at her heart.

"Someone will have to command at the postern" Braban pointed out. "'Tis a narrow gate, yet our vulnerable place. No portcullis. Yet can be held with but a few men. You wish me.....".

"Not you, Robert. I need you here. But I agree. The postern is the place. The main gate is a difficult nut to crack for such as they are, lacking siege engines".

"And so.....".

Boxhull was considering the options, when Ursula came to him and begged the place. "Nay" cried the knight, half-heartedly. "I refuse. The post calls for a good fighting man. Is't not so, Robert?".

Braban took his time in answering; seeing which the lady saw her chance. "You cannot refuse. I am nothing to you. Margaret and Elizabeth are family. They you could refuse. I am my own mistress". He hesitated. She made an impatient gesture. "If I drop you can place a man there. But I demand the right to die in my own way and take some of those devils with me".

"'Tis suicide. You will be slain without question".

Ursula sighed wearily. "Then that will be the piper paid, that is all". Margaret and Elizabeth gazed at her admiringly. Bess thought, this is a wench worth the knowing. Ukkefeld went on urgently: "For my body I care little. And for my soul's salvation, I have been shriven and am in a state of grace. Besides" she went on, with a forced laugh, "'tis a narrow gate even as you have said. Give me a dozen men-at-arms and I will hold it until the day's end".

She had logic on her side and Boxhull knew it. "I have no time to argue. It must be someone in harness. But I tell you again, 'tis suicide". He paused, as if hoping that she would withdraw, but he had quite mistaken her resolve. "Then go in God's name and when you strike, strike lustily. I give you my captain of the guard, Wat Cruttenden, and a dozen men-at-arms of your choice".

"And I will relieve you" Margaret cried eagerly, "and after me, Bess".

Ursula smiled, and departed from them happily, as if she had been going to meet a lover.

Boxhull, a man given to indecision, wondered if he had made the right decision and both women confirmed it. "Ay, but you would say it". Braban shrugged, but to bolster the knight's confidence, he too agreed. Elizabeth smiled to herself, admiring this comradeship in men. If a leader ceased to believe in himself, the fate of his men was not worth a groat.

At the postern, Ursula marshalled her men, and, with a phlegmatic Cruttenden beside her, waited with naked sword. She heard shouts from above, the splash as the bound faggots hit the water, and the screams of rebels as they found a watery grave, transfixed by shafts from above. Still they came on, as she knew they would, over the bodies of their fellows, until the moat was wedged with faggots from bank to gate.

Simon of Funtridge, one of Margaret's men, rumbled an oath, taking hold of his sword purposefully: "What keeps them, I wonder? I grow weary of waiting".

Cruttenden turned, glowering. "Shut your jaw, soldier. They'll come soon enough, I warrant you".

Ursula wriggled her hands in the leather lined bronze gauntlets, gripping her sword, eager for the fray. Hatred dulled fear, producing near-euphoria. Cruttenden, his cock inflated, wondered how women coped with the excitement of a fight. Maybe they leaked, he thought. Funny the things you think about before a battle, he grinned. No need to worry about the Ukkefeld woman, she was as eager as he was. The truth was, Ursula's heart raced and her nipples were hard; she yearned to feel her steel enter a peasant body.

Without warning the gate shuddered as the tree smashed home. It held. There was a second tremendous blow, and the gate split from base to arch. Yet still it held. It took repeated blows from the ram to smash the stout oak, but everyone knew how close it was.

"First one to you, Mistress" Wat suggested, "'tis fitting: Push home lustily".

Ursula gave a breathless little laugh. "Rest easy, Wat. I'll cut the bastard down, never fear".

Suddenly the gate gave, with a tremendous crack. With a howl of triumph the peasants clawed at the opening with bare hands. The first man through died, skewered on her sword, writhing at her feet. Then they threw themselves at the steel wall. Time after time they were thrown back with great loss, but still they came on. Even Ursula felt a grudging admiration, as she hacked them down in blood.

Inevitably the defenders had their losses. Sometimes a man would fall, to be dragged away, his place being taken by a comrade. Yet, the gateway being narrow, the steel wall did not give way and every attack broke against it, thrown back with much loss. But it was desperate work; and it went on all morning with but brief lulls. During one of these Ursula allowed herself to be relieved. She panted, her muscles ached and sweat nearly blinded her. Margaret and Elizabeth took her place, most willingly.

"Here they come again" Bess reported laconically, and it was so. Within minutes she was beaten to her knees but Meg protected her until she could rise again to resume her place. Boxhull, dividing himself between the main gate and the postern, felt certain the next attack would be the last, so weary was everyone. But always from somewhere they found strength to hurl back the seemingly never-ending waves of howling attackers. Braban found time to lend a hand too besides supervising activity at the main gate - the rocks, the boiling pitch, Christ how he hated the smell of pitch. The peasants didn't like it much either; at any rate, after the first taste of it, they tended to be inactive at the main gate.

Boxhull listened anxiously for Halle's tucket. He strained so hard to hear it that sometimes he thought he did, over the chaos around him. How long did it take to ride from Hastings, he wondered? Or had they been abandoned? The thought chilled him. It was then he started thinking of the secret way out. About the ladies who had proved such rocks he thought little, except to ask God how he could have been so wrong about them. But the day was not over yet. How many would be dead at the end, and how many alive? He knew how much he owed them, as did the men. Without them to lead, how could he and Braban have spread themselves around, keeping morale high? With all that, if he had to, he would abandon them. He was a brutal man, was Boxhull. Each time he passed Braban he growled: "She lives yet". Braban would grunt and go about his business, yet the Ukkefeld woman was rarely out of his mind. The only person about whom Braban had hard thoughts was Kate Cralle, who had evinced no anxiety to take her share of the heat at the postern. Yet she was well protected. He spat his contempt. A gutless piece. The others had guts, but Cralle.....

The sun was well past its zenith when, during a lull in the attack, the tucket sounded in the woods far away to the south, Battle way. Both defenders and rebels heard it and stood still to listen; the peasants uneasy, the defenders grimly joyous.

Boxhull spun, signed himself and made for the stairs.

"Robert!" he roared, but Braban had already sped on his errand. Suddenly the postern gate cleared like magic and everyone knew it was over. They stared at each other, at the bodies, at their swords running with blood. Disbelief in their survival was on everybody's lips.

Margaret placed her arm around Ursula's shoulder. "Oh, well done, my love!" she gasped, "'tis not over yet".

They ran through to the courtyard, leaving six men to guard the gate, all archers. The air was full of shouted orders, the profanities of weary men and neighs of horses being forced into line. The place was full of mounted men-

at-arms. Braban had formed the men into six columns. The ladies forced their way to the front and mounted their chargers, fronting the men who had been allotted to them, grim, hard-faced fighting men.

Against his better judgement, Boxhull had given Cralle a column. She and Margaret, Elizabeth and Ursula made four leaders, while he and Braban fronted the other two. Braban held the knight's horse while he mounted, then swung his bulk to the saddle. They were ready.

Boxhull eyed them for signs of weakness, for, as he well knew, nothing is so contagious as fear. There were no signs of it and he sighed his relief. Braban blocked his view of Cralle, and with her he bothered not at all. He knew only too well that what was to come might daunt a man, much less a woman, yet apparently fear broke against the sharp rocks of hatred.

Ukkefeld, her thoughts inflamed, was feverish, flushed. Her lips were dry and she continually moistened them with her tongue, while her eyes moved restlessly, bright in her face. Boxhull knew the signs well enough; he had charged lightly armed men before and knew how seductive is an easy prey. He wondered where she got it, this blood-lust, unseemly in a wench. Then he thought on her father and wondered no more. Yet her eagerness to kill scared this professional soldier; hatred, he knew, is a bad camp-fellow.

He had given her the Winchelsea men, Alard's. He asked himself how she would have behaved, had she lived. Bess said she had guts. Ursula turned in the saddle, speaking to Richard Jordan. Her words were inaudible but Boxhull could guess. He admired her taste in horseflesh; it was a heavily armoured beast. She was certainly the best equipped in the castle. If wealth guaranteed survival, she would survive. She caught his eye and shouted at him over the din: "I go straight for Haswell. 'Tis agreed".

If anyone could reach the man, she could. The weight of her attack alone would scatter the peasants. Yet he owed her a warning, for he had taken note of Haswell from the walls. "Ay, and may God help you" he shouted back. "Carries a massive iron club. The armour is not made that can withstand a direct blow from such a weapon".

Meg leaned over and clasped her hand. Ursula smiled before closing her visor.

He had no fear for his wife, did Boxhull. She had experience. He watched her turn in the saddle with a rasp of steel, jesting with the men and raising a laugh from them. She knew intuitively the handling of men. They were a rough crowd but they adored her and followed where she led willingly. Her lips were full and moist, her face animated. Meg obviously thought she was fighting on God's side.

Next to him rode Bess. She sat her horse with the consummate ease of someone who had almost been born on one. She turned to her brother-in-law with a smile: "I wonder if fate waits out there?".

"How mean you?".

"Am I to pay for my sins this day?". She gave a twisted smile.

"Speak not foolishly" he growled, closing his visor.

They waited for the second blast on Halle's horn. It was nearer this time.

Above on the battlements, Giles Ford roared information to those below. "They break from the wood.....by the Mass! there may be five hundred.....I am a sinner elsenay, more".

Boxhull drew his sword. It was the signal for everyone to do the same. Serious business indeed. Braban shouted the order for the portcullis to be raised and the drawbridge lowered. The wait was an ordeal to all, but there was nothing to do but wait. Then the drawbridge crashed onto the opposite bank and Boxhull spurred, thundering across, peasants flying from their path.

"They escape!" the shout went up, "cut them down".

"Ay" snarled Braban, "if you can".

It was like a red hot knife slicing through butter. A few brave souls stood, but went down before the crashing steel. Boxhull saw Halle's force rushing towards them, and commended Giles Ford for his accuracy. There must indeed have been five hundred or thereabouts. Nay, more.

"Faith" Boxhull thought, "he does me proud".

The peasants understood at last, breaking and running in their hundreds into the valley. The green, sun-drenched hillside was black with men, running, stumbling, cursing and screaming, trying to escape from the thundering mass of steel behind them.

"The fools" roared Halle, saluting with his sword, "we have them. Roger, cut them off by the bridge; we take them in the rear. Spur!".

The horses flew at a stretching gallop into the valley. The hot air, rushing through the vents in their helmets, was fresh if not cooling. To the right Halle's men charged parallel, cutting and thrusting as they went, driving the rebels towards the Glottingham men, numbering about two hundred. They blocked the access to the bridge and it was there that the peasants stood to fight for life, in the loop of the stream.

All that day, Catherine de Cralle's teeth had been chattering with fear. She made no pretence to courage; she was simply terrified. She had seen the other ladies fighting doggedly at the postern and failed to force her legs to carry her where she knew she ought to have been. Instead, she fled to her chamber, where she sat sobbing her shame. She ought to have been by her mistress's side, come what may. But she could not. She was a coward, unworthy to serve such a brave lady as Margaret of Glottingham. Kate wondered where she could run to hide her shame. Any desire to kill in her was deep, deep down; and yet once the portcullis was raised and the drawbridge down and she knew there was no help for it, fatalism took charge of her and a kind of despairing strength surged through her. Like many a coward, faced with peril, she drew on resources she never knew she had. The fear of being hurt receded. Her brain hammered out the message - kill, kill, kill, your life depends on it.

No one will help you. All you have is your sword. It alone stands between you and death. It was not courage but it was a fair substitute.

She saw the rebels stand, archers to the fore with bows drawn, a dour and courageous body of men. Then the air seemed black with arrows. The heavily armed leaders took the brunt of the discharge as they galloped at full speed toward them. Kate Cralle yelped as arrows crashed into her and clattered harmlessly away. But the peasants had one notable success. Far from Cralle, to the left, Elizabeth screamed, laying back in the saddle, arms wideflung. Her horse reared, sending her flying from the saddle.

"The whore is slain!" roared Haswell, jubilantly.

Roger swore. He did not turn, could not. Margaret, too, had heard the cry and her heart stopped for a second. Bess slain? It could not be. Blazing fury consumed her. Then they were among the rebels, hacking and thrusting, a well disciplined, well equipped body. Margaret carved a scarlet path to where Dan Foster sat his mare, flailing axe in hand. Her lips were thin, her eyes inclement. They met in mortal contention but she had no doubt who would drop. The man's axe rose and fell. She swayed in the saddle like the old hand she was. Had it fallen with accurate placement she might have died there and then. As it was it simply ripped her jupon, glancing off her thigh. She laughed, slashing at him. She saw blood spurt from his face, opened up by her blade from ear to jaw. He roared in pain and rage; the axe rose again but before it could fall she plunged her sword into his throat, twisting it savagely as she withdrew it. Margaret whirled her horse, hacking her way to her man's side.

Once Kate Cralle was through the arrows and she was among the peasants, hacking and destroying, her appetite grew by what it fed on. She had no time to be afraid. All was chaos, noise, shouting but she was almost totally unaware of it. Even the punishment she took meant little to her, applying herself single-mindedly to her task as she did. In her world of death and destruction she was almost happy. What went on elsewhere in the field was a distraction which she could not indulge. She concentrated her mind on the stupid, hate-filled faces below her and then, quite suddenly, light was blotted out.

Although she knew it not, she crashed from the saddle, stunned. It was not a sword, but a beech stave, thick and heavy, that crashed against her bascinet. After a minute or two, light returned. There was another minute spent in a struggle to rise. Like a crab on its back, her movements were sluggish and un-coordinated. In those moments only her armour saved her life. Then she was on her knees, head clearing. She saw her sword, grabbed it and staggered to her feet. Hacking her way to her horse, she mounted with the help of a man-at-arms. The man placed her feet in the stirrups, while she protected him with her sword. Then he fell, mortally wounded, an arrow in his belly. She reared her horse, sending the peasants flying.

From then on she fought with concentrated fury. The staff wielder looked up before her, anxious to repeat his success, this time fatally. She severed the man's wrist and as he sank to his knees, screaming, she split his skull open.

Through streaming sweat she saw Lady Margaret, jupon in tatters, hacking her way towards her. Together they turned the flank, driving them towards the bridge, where Halle, Boxhull and Braban held the line. Out of the corner of her eye she had a fleeting glimpse of Haswell and a figure in bronze armour in mortal contention but they passed from Kate's line of vision.

Margaret had found time to look for Ursula, saw her isolated in the solid horde of peasants. She tried to hack her way through to her, but it was hopeless. All Ursula's men - or rather, Alard's - seemed to have fallen, and it was impossible that she should survive, unless she could be reached which she manifestly could not. Meg thought of her proudly. Men called Ursula many names - 'wicked', 'cruel' and 'bitch', all of which she no doubt was. But she was also a gallant lady, endowed with all the qualities of her kind, and that meant more to Margaret than anything. She could see her lover was a dead woman; she had a frisson of grief at the knowledge but not too much. Bred up as she was, Ursula would prefer to die this way than any other. The blows were crashing thick and fast onto the bronze figure but her thoughts were only of Haswell, not for the blood that streamed from her wounded leg. Repeated blows from axes had finally smashed through the plate and mail, and into her flesh. The sight of her blood brought a howl of triumph from the man.

"I send you to join your uncle!". The roar pierced the din. Ukkefeld ignored the pain of her leg, concentrating her mind on her self-appointed task. In the heat of battle she cared nothing for her own death, could she but destroy her enemy. Her sword drove into his belly until bone stopped it. It was a death wound, but he was not ready to fall. Once already his club had smashed into her breastplate. The shock seemed to affect every bone in her body, but she had come back, striking the steel cap from his head. Then came her fatal mistake, attacking the big head when she should have gone for the shoulder. His head disintegrated in red ruin. Yet he lived. The iron club rose again and descended; the blow was weaker but her breastplate, greatly weakened, split. She never knew. Her sword rose and fell continually but she too was weaker, strength sapped by loss of blood. Haswell only saw the avenging angel through the life that streamed into his eyes. The man's willpower was extraordinary. He was dying, yet he found strength enough to lift his massive club again, for the last time, using both hands. It crashed down, beating in the breastplate, and the breast behind it. Giving a stricken cry, the last of the Ukkefelds pitched forward, already dead, and fell inertly from the saddle.

Thus it was that Lady Margaret, when she looked again, saw that her beloved had gone and her armoured horse galloping madly away. Yet the bastard Haswell still kept his saddle. Margaret's parched mouth dripped imprecations. Haswell was quite dead but by some miracle of equilibrium he fell not, but continued to sit his nag, unmoving and unheeding; and Boxhull, reaching him too late, merely had to strike him and the leader of the rebels toppled from the saddle. "Phoh! the dog cheated me" growled the knight, "Damn you, Ursula".

With the death of their leader, the resolve of the peasants evaporated, as dew with the sun, as is so often the case. Haswell's had been the spirit of the local uprising; without him there was nothing left.

Encircled with steel, the rebels still crouched with weapons poised in desperation for the final, hopeless resistance. Boxhull knew he could destroy them without much further loss but his mind revolted against the expedient, even as he sought to control his fury at the loss of Ursula and Elizabeth. More, he knew how much of a close-run thing it had been. Had his men not been so well-equipped and disciplined it might not have ended so. The order to cease fighting came from his parched throat. Margaret lowered her sword reluctantly. Her eyes were glazed, drunk with hate and killing and only Braban's vice-like grip on her arm held her back.

"Lay down your arms!". The order was a bellow and there was a brief moment of hesitation before compliance. Margaret hoped they would reject the order. But it was not to be. Sword, bill and bow crashed to the ground, and the peasants stood, sullen, awaiting their fate.

"You.....Tom Cartwright". Boxhull saw a face he knew and fastened on him. "Come hither". The voice was hostile but the man forced his way through his comrades to the front.

Boxhull swallowed hard, moistening his throat with spittle. He wanted to be just, yet he would have been less than human had he felt no anger. Yet when he spoke again it was in a voice markedly less harsh and Cartwright's head jerked up in surprise.

"Fellow, I could kill you all for this day's work, and be justified. Know you that?".

"Ay, we expect no less". The words were gruff, bitter.

"Say you so? Then will you be disappointed. Get you to your homes.....all of you".

His wife's voice, furious and high, assailed his ears. "You will let them go?".

"Dead peasants are no use to anyone. I have spoken. Let them go afore I change my mind".

The men started to leave the stricken field with a dignity and order that would have impressed an impartial observer. Halle, who had not spoken before, content to leave the matter to the younger man, nodded: "A right decision".

Naturally, Lady Margaret had other views. She pushed her horse close to her husband. "You let those murdering devils go?" she cried hotly. "You must be crazed. Do you forget they have slain Ursula and Elizabeth, not to mention Jane Alard? You are a traitor".

He swore savagely. "I forget nothing that it is proper for me to remember" came his bark. "It is you who are crazed. Ursula wanted revenge and fell in the finding of it. Jane Alard died through crass stupidity. I grieve for Bess, truly. It is only in a gleeman's ballad that knights are invincible. Sometimes they fall. Bess has done so. You should be proud she fell so knightly. Ask Master Halle, else".

"And I am not sure Elizabeth is dead". Halle touched his arm and following where he pointed, he saw a silver figure that writhed impotently, a man-at-arms by her. They

spurred to where she lay, and dismounting, Margaret knelt by her sister. Elizabeth summoned up an agonised smile in answer to her sister's enquiry.

"Some slight discomfort" she whispered. "It seems I go to join Jane".

Boxhull and Halle shook their heads vigorously. "Nay, 'tis not mortal, but 'twill have to come out".

The prostrate lady bit her lip against the pain. "It feels mortal" she gasped, with a mockery of a smile.

"I doubt it not".

Almost timidly Margaret asked: "How can we?".

Boxhull frowned at her. "Elizabeth is a soldier. She can take pain. Let us but pray the head is not lodged in the body but has gone through, as being the armpit it may have done. An arrowhead in the body is an awkward thing to remove" he added, with monumental understatement. He had had one removed from his hip and it was not something he cared to recall.

Margaret raised her visor and Elizabeth stared up at her sweat streaked face, grim and unrelenting as had been their father's. Seeing her distress, Elizabeth touched her gauntleted hand with her own and tried to smile. "Mine sister, courage, 'twill soon be over".

"Ay, but not here". Boxhull glanced at the peasants dejectedly crossing the bridge under the watchful eyes of the men-at-arms and a much wearied Kate Cralle. "Must wait till we reach the castle". He then sent Braban for a cart.

He regarded Cralle's hacked armour and muttered: "The Cralle woman fought well. I had thought her gutless. Seems I erred".

"Truly" Meg agreed, "without her I had not turned their flank. She is a gallant lady". Margaret was generous.

"Yet was she not at the gate".

"Fighting comes not naturally to her, as to me and Bess. Yet is she a brave lady after her own fashion".

It seemed so. His eyes flickered down to Elizabeth, who gasped as a stab of pain racked her.

"Send Henry Busbridge to me, Roger" she murmured weakly. "He does service as my squire. 'Tis but right that he should help bear my burden".

Walt Lade, unobtrusively in attendance, hastened to her side. "Master Busbridge fell, Mistress".

"Henry.....dead?". She could scarce credit it.

The old man grinned, mighty unsuitably, Halle thought. "Ay, that he is, Mistress. Kicked a bit afore he died". He saw Boxhull's frown. "No offence meant, Sir Roger. I meant he died the hard way".

Elizabeth smiled painfully. "No offence taken, old friend. I know what is in Walt's mind, Roger. No man likes to die with unfulfilled ambitions. No matter, Walt Lade. You can do Henry's service to me". He bowed. He was not a gentleman and her condescension moved him strangely.

She lay silent, arms wideflung, trying to ignore her throbbing body. It was boiling in her harness, the hot afternoon sun beating down. Then she bethought her: "What of Ursula? I would see the dear lady".

It was the enquiry Margaret dreaded. She felt the hot tears pricking her eyelids as she stared fixedly at her steel shod feet. Elizabeth understood. "I see" she murmured softly, "was it easy?".

Margaret shook her head dumbly, not trusting herself to speak.

"I saw it not" Boxhull grunted. "One moment she there, fighting hard. Then she had gone".

Elizabeth's eyes glistened. "A brave lady" she stated, quietly. "'Tis pity she could not have had her revenge".

"She had it".

They were hard women and death in combat the glory of their class. All that scared them was disease. So Bess grieved not too much for the Ukkefeld woman; yet it was hard to lose a friend. And it was worse for Meg, of course, they were more than just friends. But her splendid armour should have kept her safe, she mused, would have done with any ordinary weapon. It was only when she saw Haswell's club, made in his own smithy, crudely fashioned bands of iron around an iron ball, that she understood the nature of Ursula's doom and the courage with which she faced it.

Margaret turned, looking towards the castle, shading her eyes from the sun. "The cart comes". They saw it lumbering down the hill with agonising slowness. Boxhull eyed his wife's much savaged harness, at the thin trickle of blood that ran from beneath the camail over the breastplate. "'Tis nothing. A pin prick" she replied offhandedly in answer to his query. He knew how she gloried in wounds, honourably received, and said no more.

He looked at the long valley, strewn with bodies. Still the air was rent with screams of the wounded and dying. It was not the first such sight he had seen and he had long since become hardened to the necessities of war. Yet there was something frightful about civil strife. He thought, with sudden pity, of the widows resulting from this day's work. Then, as so often before, he closed his mind against these thoughts, unworthy of a professional soldier. His eyes dropped to Bess. She had fainted. He squinted up at the sun. No shade for the poor woman. Margaret placed herself between the sun and her sister, the shadow covering the now immobile face.

Halle glanced at the slow moving cart. "Yon fellow does not hurry himself" he growled. Boxhull looked to where Braban rode beside the cart, then at the driver. It was clearly Hucksteppe from Munfield.

"A Saxon. You don't hurry such. We are nothing to him. To such as he, we are all Norman bastards".

The cart eventually came and Elizabeth laid very gently on it, still unconscious. Margaret swung herself to saddle, and looked down at Hucksteppe. "You, fellow, follow me. We find the body of Mistress de Ukkefeld".

The cart started to lumber across the iron-hard ground. Boxhull nodded to his squire: "Best go with them, Robert".

Halle glanced at him, half-smiling. "These Echyngham wenches, tough as the steel they wear".

Boxhull nodded. "Even Bess did not whimper".

Margaret rode straight to where she had last seen Ursula and dismounted. Pulling dead peasants from her body, she knelt and looked closely at the wound that had finished her lover. She whitened. Braban crouched by her, not interrupting her prayers. She signed herself and turned to him.

"A terrible wound".

"Seen worse". It was true but possibly not the most tactful thing to say. He had not had time to consider his good fortune but thought of it now, seeing her laying there in her blood. Boxhull had said she would drop before night-fall and he had been right. He straightened her legs and laid the outstretched arms by the body. Margaret raised the visor. The eyes were open, staring, lifeless jelly. Lady Margaret closed them reverently. Braban watched her with a distaste he took pains to conceal. He thought, the corrupter and the corrupted! The corrupter was slain, yet the corrupted lived. The consolation was that Ukkefeld would whip no more young maidens and desecrate his family's home with her perversions. He coughed. "No one rises after such a wound. It was quick. Knew little pain. Doubtless dead afore she left the saddle".

"Doubtless". There were tears in Margaret's face as she looked down on the peaceful face below her. She closed the dead woman's visor slowly, reverentially, as if Ukkefeld was a saint, he thought. Mayhap to Lady Margaret she was, he thought humorously.

Braban took a deep breath and looked around him. Men-at-arms were going around, putting the dying peasants out of their misery. He had seen much death, had Braban, villages plundered, women raped and murdered, and he had laughed, in the madness of war, at their screams at death. Now here lay one who but for a fortunate chance he would taken to wife, despite her spotted reputation. She had been beautiful enough and would have given him a son. Well, no matter. Now he was a landed gentleman again, wenches of good family would be falling over themselves to bed with Robert Braban of High Ridge.

He beckoned the cart driver. Between them they laid the dead woman beside Elizabeth de Echyngham. He stared at the bodies, musing. The Court whore would live. Better that she also had died. He felt Margaret's eyes on him.

"What ails you man?". Consumed with grief as she was, she guessed some part of what he had been thinking. "You have High Ridge at last. Does it not please you?".

His eyes flashed but she saw it not. By that bitter remark she had garnered herself a lifetime's enemy. No man likes to have his soul stripped bare, revealing its rottenness. She would have cause, in years to come, to regret her brutality.

They mounted their horses without a word, and rode

in silence, one on each side of the cart.

Simon Hucksteppe flicked at his old nag casually. He was a man who kept his mouth firmly closed, and had a great respect for his betters. They called him 'a lord's man'. At 'The Tun', when others had been listening to the rabble-rousers, he had slunk off, unwilling even to hear such treason. It was not that he lacked sympathy but he was not a brave man. He was not proud of himself but at least he was alive when others were dead. As for the lords and their wenches, if they wanted to fight they must expect to be slain. And all this fuss over the Ukkefeld bitch! Dying was the best thing she'd ever done. For Hucksteppe, all was well with his small world. Was not the sun in the sky, warming, comforting his old bones?

He cast a look behind him at the bodies, moving with jolting of the cart. It was alright for the nobility and their women, he reflected. They could afford armour and such. The cost of the whore's harness would keep him and his family in comfort for years.

Lady Margaret glanced down at the bodies, moving closer to each other as the cart jolted its way over the hard ground. She pushed her horse level to the driver, her face dark.

"Go easy, fellow. If my sister suffers from the jolting of your damned cart, I'll have your teeth unlocked, one by one".

She would, too, the damned brach, he thought, of a sudden fearful. He touched his greasy cap, and slowed the pace. Better she had died back there too. How Boxhull could bed with the she-wolf was beyond him. They rumbled over the drawbridge and into the castle.

Men hastened forward, removing the bodies, one to the small chamber next to the chapel, known to the men with soldierly humour as 'the shambles' and the other to Boxhull's private chamber.

It grew on towards evening, the sun low in the sky, casting long shadows, softening the spectacle in the valley, and around the castle.

9TH JUNE, 1381

EVENING

Lady Margaret stopped but to remove her gauntlets, bascinet and arming cap before following Ursula's body to the small chamber by the chapel. She always looked fine with her dark hair flowing free, and knew it. Her intention was the praiseworthy one of seeing her friend stripped and prepared for the tomb. With tender hands she removed her bascinet, arming cap and spurs; but that was as much as Boxhull permitted her to do. He put his foot down firmly.

"Meg, this is one thing you desire not to see, for your sanity's sake".

By this she reasonably understood that he knew of her relations with Ursula. She burst into tears. It was so unusual, so without precedent that both men stared. She had reached the end of her tether and the violence of her grief astonished them. Her sobs would have melted the heart of a statue.

She allowed herself to be led away, grieving, to her chamber, where Boxhull called Kate Cralle. She came, red of eye from her own tears. Kate had realised the amount of killing she had done and reaction had set in. Insensitive as ever, he shook her.

"Stop that noise, Kate. Your mistress needs your service". Then he softened his tone: "And Kate, I thank you for your work this day. Without you, Lady Margaret might well lay dead. Will always be in your debt".

"I was craven" she mumbled miserably, "a spineless, gutless coward".

"At first mayhap. But you found your courage when it was most needed".

"I was sore affeared".

"Most of us are, wench. But take heart. You bore your arms valiantly".

"Did I in truth?".

"Have I not said it? Now tend to your mistress". He made to turn away, then stopped, touching her face. "There is blood here, Kate".

"A dog of a peasant unhorsed me. His blow must have broken the skin. But I later slew him".

"Will be a scar".

"Sir Roger, I will carry it with pride".

He grinned his appreciation of her new found spirit. "Margaret and you deserve each other".

Returning to Braban he remarked: "Could not let her see this. 'Tis awful".

"Nay.....have never seen Lady Margaret so....womanish".

"She keeps it well hidden. But let us to our task".

"'Twill be worse later. I fear the mail will have been driven into the body. 'Twas a terrible blow. That Haswell, may the torments of Hell attend him".

It would profit nobody by detailing the horrors of the body of Ursula de Ukkefeld when she had been stripped of her honourable equipage. Suffice it to say that she was cleaned and wrapped in wax sheets, and then in several layers of linen.

Then men came to bear her to the chapel, where Tunstall said Requiem Mass. For Wat Cruttenden it was particularly poignant. He could not believe that the lady who had fought beside him so valiantly was gone. She had treated him as a comrade. Not every rich lady would slap him on the back and call him "Wat". And she spoke sweetly, in a womanish way, yet had a manlike courage. Cruttenden honoured her memory, which in future would bring him much favour from Lady Margaret.

Kate Cralle had found nobody to unbuckle her armour, Braban being elsewhere, so she attended the Mass in warlike trappings, as did her mistress. She found that her courage brought her unlooked for benefits, for she intercepted many admiring glances; nothing stimulates a man, she found, like a brave woman. Later, Margaret did duty as her squire, and listened to her talk, smiling sadly all the while. And when Kate offered to do as much for her, she was smilingly refused. "Nay, Kate, tired as I am, there is much to do, and Master Knelle is wounded. I will retain it. But Kate, I would have you stay with me always. I love you dearly..... it would please me greatly". Naturally her wish was granted.

In another part of the castle, at that precise time, Elizabeth de Echyngham was suffering the crude surgery of her day. They laid her on a table and relieved her of her harness. The exercise tore no more than a moan from her but when it came to the removal of the arrow, things were very different.

Margaret went to her sister as soon as possible and stood by her side, gazing down compassionately at the agonised face below her. She took her hand, pressing it comfortingly. It was about the only comfort Elizabeth had. True, the arrow head had emerged from her back and to that extent she was fortunate. Getting at it was quite another matter. The upper part of her mail could not be removed since the arrow pinned it to the body. It was obvious to Margaret what had to be done, but the men would not take direction from her. She ground her teeth at her sister's pain, while they stood around discussing. Finally, however, they agreed to do what she had suggested, which was to sever the arrow as close to the mail as possible. Elizabeth's suffering during this exercise had to be seen to be believed. But finally it was achieved. By this time the unfortunate woman had swooned, quite understandably and during this time her mail was pulled from her. It would have been better had she not recovered consciousness until it was all done, but with a groan she did. They turned her over and prepared to draw the arrow from her.

A few minutes later, on the stairs outside the chamber, Walt Lade heard his mistress's cry, which fell to a groan, to be followed by an oppressive silence, for she had again fainted.

Later, Boxhull sought out Halle, who he found in the untypical exercise of thumbing through a manuscript book of sermons. He looked up sharply.

"'Tis over? Heard the cry".

Boxhull slumped down wearily on the settle. "Ay, 'tis over. 'Tis permitted a woman to cry out when she is hurt".

"Fool!". Halle stared at the younger man, disapproving the assumed hardness. "You are more moved than you admit".

"Mayhap" came the grudging response. "Having an arrow removed tears more than a grunt out of a man. Bore it well, whore though she be".

"How lays she?".

"Easy, in clean linen. Sleeping. 'Twill be some weeks.....".

"She will live?".

The interruption seemed to startle Boxhull. "Live? Ay, she will live. Couldn't hurt that one if you took an axe to her. A tough breed".

"Like enough". Halle was short with him. "There are times when your father speaks through you. Exercise a little Christian charity, man. No one is without guilt. Have been to the wars yourself. Not so spotless that you can point a finger at others".

"Different for women" muttered Boxhull. "Better than we are. Softening influence.....".

Halle had heard it all before and waved him to silence. "There are times when you prattle like a damned Lollard" he growled, "yet I know you for a good son of Holy Church. But enough of this". A thick thumb jerked behind him. "What of the fallen?".

"Have pits dug".

"Ay, but when?".

"The morrow. At sun-up".

"'Tis well. And the others?".

"What others?".

Halle yerked him in the ribs with his scabbarded sword. "Never knew you so blunt in the mind" he grumbled, "Have you forgot? Sir William de Ukkefeld still lies in his blood before his altar. A fine end for a priest!". Again the thumb jerked behind him. "And the Mistress Ursula lies in your own chapel prepared for the tomb. Best attend to it, boy. 'Tis high summer; leave it many days and you can nose her as you pass the stairs".

Boxhull knew he was right, and nodded. "It shall be tomorrow".

"And forget not the Alard wench. She lies on straw in the stables. 'Tis enough to affright the horses, the stench, they tell me. And the maggots.....".

"Have pity. I said tomorrow. So shall it be".

"Ay. They are our own kind, not peasants. See them decently interred according to their rank. And mark me, remember the Ukkefeld wench with especial honour. 'Twas touch and go out there. Had she not cut down Haswell and given her life in the doing, you and I might not be sitting here talking".

"I know it well. Brass shall witness her deed".

"See that it does".

"Yet I would that other virtues rode side by side with her valour".

"Nay, no more. The lady is not here to defend herself".

"But to think I.....how could I have been so wrong about her?".

"Oh, as to that, you are a man and therefore a fool".
Then: "Ladies are as brave as we. Remember it well".

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Dawn had scarcely pushed its way over the eastern skyline when the men of Munfield started on the pits, supervised by a brooding Robert Braban. The men first dragged the bodies to one end of the long field of death, where they were piled atop of each other, a grisly monument to failure. Braban frowned in their direction, then down at the ancient acreman by his stirrup.

"Well, Harry Creasey?" he growled.

"The men-at-arms. You want 'em, Master Robert? Ay, thought you would. Separate like". He turned, cupping gnarled hands to his mouth and shouting at his fellows.

Braban jerked his thumb towards the dead. "Your son in that lot, Harry?".

The old man spat. "My Tom? You knows better than that, Master Robert. More sense, my Tom has. The fools! We've always served Boxhull; a good lord. Why should we rise?".

"Why indeed? Many did, old gossip".

"More fool they. Knew they not how t'would end? Listened to that Haswell over at Salehurst belike. Or that Dan Foster. Much good it did 'em. A lot of women husbandless this day".

"And a lot of brats fatherless. 'Tis true enough".

Braban rode back to the castle, leaving Wat Crutten-den in his place. Then, about eleven they rode for Salehurst leaving Braban in control of the castle. Halle's five hundred men-at-arms - a hundred had fallen in the battle - made a brave show, their body armour new scoured. Against the skyline the powerful force was impressive. The men digging the pits leaned on their tools to watch. Leading the force rode Halle and Boxhull, and between them the seemingly indestructible Lady Margaret. Behind the cavalcade the phlegmatic Hucksteppe drove his cart, bucking over the hard, rutted ground. Lashed to it were the bodies of Ursula de Ukkefeld and Jane Alard, making their last journey.

They rode slow, because of the bodies on the cart, coming to Rotherbridge Abbey when the sun was high in the sky. Still visible in the road were traces of the burned abbey rolls; Margaret's brows came together in disapproval. Then on to where the silver river pursued its placid and timeless way through the meadows. A slight incline remained, then they drew rein before the embattled tower of Salehurst church.



It was a village of the dead. No sign of life could be detected in the miserable cots around the church, the alehouse was barred and shuttered, the land was devoid of humanity. Halle rumbled an oath: "Did we kill them all?". Boxhull shrugged. Margaret glanced at the cart distressfully, two tears gleaming in the corners of her eyes. She blinked fiercely, thanking God that nobody could see her pain.

Halle took charge, leaving Boxhull to stare at the church tower, gloomily anticipating what they would find therein. "Four men to carry the hurdle, the rest of you surround the church". He turned to his captain-of-the-guard: "You, Richard Standbynorth, you'll attend me".

Inside the church they stopped short, Halle's wrathful rumble cutting through the silence. Sir William de Ukkefeld lay, arms outflung, face downwards in front of the altar. Even as Ursula had related, his head had been smashed in by an axe blow. A little way off, near the south door, where he had presumably stood his ground to allow his mistress time to escape, lay Ursula's squire, his brains scattered over the floor. Boxhull had not appreciated the man, Conghurst, very highly; his reputation was bad, but then so was everyone associated with High Ridge. A devil with the women, they said. But no matter, he had died doing his duty and that excused much. His sword was still in his hand; a suitable way for a gentleman to go, Boxhull thought. Halle looked grim: "Where's that priest o' thine, that Matthew fellow?". As Tunstall shuffled forward, he grated: "Work for you here".

How Margaret got through that day she never knew. Her nerve ends were raw and jagged and she was close to screaming. She had held her beloved before she went into battle but as the white-swathed body was lowered into the hastily dug grave between the two buttresses on the south side of the church, it was almost as much as she could bear. It pained her that Ursula had not been encased in lead, as befitted her gentility, but in this heat it was imperative to get her below ground quickly, lest she corrupt. Margaret wanted to die so that she could be laid in the same grave with that dearest of women. Then she cursed herself for being a fool. Life went on, it had to.

It was a warm spot, between those two buttresses, sheltered from east and west, and north by the bulk of the church. The sun, which she had loved so much, would beat down upon that blessed spot. Still, it was hard to say farewell. Meg's memory sped back over the years to happier, peaceful days, when they had sat there, backs against the church wall, holding hands and exchanging hopes for the future. God God, Margaret thought, it was the year before she married, so long ago. Ursula was newly out of the nunnery, pulchritudinous and avid for adventure. Now one of them was dead, gloriously it is true but still dead. Lady Margaret started to weep.

She had taken off her right gauntlet and her nails dug into her hand in anguish. Boxhull, with a rare flash of insight, whispered: "Be comforted, wife. She died as a knight, right bravely". Ay, she thought, and this was the only consolation. Had she given her life in vain, it would have been insupportable. Looked at properly, it was Ursula's gallantry that had turned the tide, snatching victory from defeat. The lady was very proud of her friend.

There were three other bodies to be laid in the earth - Jane Alard, the priest and Thomas Conghurst, but about these Margaret cared little. The priest was laid near Ursula and the others outside the east end of the church. Alard she had not known in life; nevertheless, she wore her harness, which had certainly saved her life many times in the fight, and she forced herself to feel some compassion for her. Alard was doing rather more than smell in the heat and Boxhull was pleased to see her below ground. Even in death Alard did not return to Winchelsea. But as Boxhull commented with a shrug: "One hole is as good as another".

After the funeral they mounted to ride back to Glottingham - all that is except Lady Margaret. She had other fish to fry and would not be dissuaded. Boxhull left her twenty men-at-arms and her squire, John Knelle. She also kept Hucksteppe and his cart. "We ride to High Ridge".

Ursula had made a will, leaving all to Lady Margaret, but the latter, knowing full well the reluctance of courts to admit testaments by ladies, had every intention of acquiring her friend's chattels before the proving of the document, if indeed it was ever proved. It was high-handed but she had cogent reasons for so doing. As far as possible she wished to protect the lady's reputation. Moreover, she did not trust Braban, once he had taken possession of the manor (and legally he was now the owner, since the lease, by Ursula's death, was now null and void) to hand back the effects of the woman he had been prepared to marry. Even supposing he could find them. There were secrets at High Ridge that only Margaret now knew. Ursula had long since shown her the access to the small staircase, formed in the thickness of the wall. The entrance was in her bedchamber, where a complicated system of counterweights allowed a section of the wall to pivot inwards, thus giving access to a turret room. The real entrance, in the corridor outside, had been blocked giving the illusion of a blank. The secret was safe, as Ursula had brought masons from London to do the work, yet Braban, having been born in the house, would soon detect the work.

The small room at the top of the stairs was many things. First, it was her treasury, where she kept jewels and coin. It was also her muniment room, where she kept deeds, leases and the like, for she was a very rich lady, with wide estates, as far over as Lurgashall and up to the Surrey border. It was also her armoury, with swords and jewelled daggers, maces and flails, and a magnificent bronze harness, completely unused and still in its protective grease. From that day Margaret would wear it, declaring to all men her love for the fallen lady. But there were other things there, implements of Ursula's perversions, which had to be utterly destroyed, like whips and her page's dress. But more than all this, it had been their love nest, with a fine bed in which, sealed away from all interference, they would make love with great content.

As she rode over the drawbridge of the moated manor house, Margaret encountered horrors unimagined. Ursula's men had apparently been overwhelmed and every man had had his throat slit and sometimes obscenities perpetrated on their bodies, possibly by women who had suffered at their hands, Margaret guessed with a frisson of distaste.

"Wait here, John" she grated, and Knelle nodded in silent shock.

She walked slowly up the stone stairs that had so often felt her feet before. And she went in some trepidation. Despite the heat outside, the place was chill. The torches in their sconces were long since dead and she smelt death all around her. Then, on the landing, she found the body of Ursula's woman, naked and raped and, judging from the bruises at her throat, strangled afterwards. Margaret stepped over the poor wretch and went on her way into the private apartments.

Here the priceless tapestries had been torn down by ignorant hands, gowns from smashed presses added to them, and a bonfire made in the centre of the floor. Even the glorious bed had been destroyed with axes. It was a mindless orgy of destruction that nauseated Margaret. Still the smell of smoke hung on the air, not in itself distasteful but in the context doubly so.

A few small items from Ursula's silver service was scattered over the floor - a goblet here, a knife there - and she rescued them reverently. She kissed the Ukkefeld arms engraved on the goblet and put it to one side. She would treasure it always.

At least the stairway was secure. Only two people had known its secret, Ursula and herself; and the peasants had not the wit, or time, to search for it. She closed the entrance behind her and climbed the narrow stairs. In the deedbox she found the Will. It was a simple but moving document, and she cried a little. Then she carried everything of value into the lower chamber, that is to say, the coin, the jewels, the deedbox and the harness. Turning then to Ursula's whips, she took her dagger and cut them into pieces. She then wrapped them in the page's dress and left the room for the last time. She then called for her squire.

"John Knelle, two trustworthy men to take these to the cart. See to it yourself. I will myself bring the deedbox. And on the way home, ride behind the cart to guard it. I make you accountable for every item. 'Tis understood?"

"Ay, Lady Margaret".

"And John" she went on, using her soft voice, "you understand we have no business here, in terms of the law. We make trespass. But Ursula wished me to have these memorials of her; and Braban being Braban.....you understand?"

"My mouth stays closed, Lady Margaret".

"And the men?"

"Braban shall not hear of it".

She smiled. "You are certainly the man for me, John Knelle". She clapped him on the shoulder in friendly fashion. "Get the men. We will stay till it is all in the cart".

As the men removed the dead woman's effects, Knelle said, pointing to the floor. "And those poor devils down there? And the woman outside?"

"What would you, John?"

"They deserve burial. They were soldiers".

"Not good ones. Not like you, John de Knelle".

"Nonetheless.....and the woman outside, Bessie Lockerson, is't not? A gentlewoman, 'tis not fitting.....".

"'Tis Braban's duty. Cannot shoulder the world's cares. He shall be told when we reach Glottingham. Roger will give him leave of absence, I doubt not. 'Tis his house after all. Would not thank me for interfering in what is his. You know well he covets this manor".

"Not wi'out reason, lady".

"'Tis true. So, leave we it to him".

And thus it was. Boxhull gave him leave of absence and he rode off to take possession of his house, carrying with him Matthew Tunstall.

When Lady Margaret reached Glottingham, it was better than four in the afternoon. Her first concern was to see the contents of the cart transferred to her chamber. Boxhull said nothing as to her high-handedness. Then they rode forth, she and Boxhull, accompanied by Halle, to view the pits. The immense cavity yawned in the sun. Beyond it, by the heaped bodies, were a row of carts; arms taken from the dead were thrown into them. Clothes were kept separately. As a body was stripped, the naked man was tossed unceremoniously into the pit. A man was lowered into it by a comrade, using his belt as a rope. It was his task to arrange the bodies in some semblance of order. When they arrived, he had just been lowered and was lost to sight, so deep was the pit. As time wore on and body after body rolled into the pit, the man's hair, then his head came into view as he stood on more and more corpses.

Margaret, who had done her share of the slaughter, let her heart go out to the soldier. "Not a nice duty" she opined, "ale would not come amiss". It was seen to, Boxhull's only regret being that she had to remind him of it.

Wat Cruttenden rumbled an oath as a particularly big body rolled over the edge of the pit and vanished from sight. "That was Dan Foster" he growled.

Boxhull nodded, with unconcern. "Seen Haswell go yet?". The man-at-arms hadn't. It was a good ten minutes later when the peasant leader followed his comrade into the grave.

Margaret murmured: "Bless you, Ursula".

"Amen to that" Halle agreed, "and likewise to you Lady Margaret, for yon Foster". She smiled, graciously inclining her head, indicating that it had been her pleasure.

Boxhull turned to Cruttenden. "When they've done here, Wat, give every man an esterling, as much ale as they can sup and let them share the clothes between them".

"Best have some men-at-arms to stand by, Sir Roger. Bound to be fights over the clothes".

"Ay, 'tis true" Boxhull sighed, "The greed of the poor is as vile as the greed of the rich. But see to it. No reason why the clothes of traitors should not warm the bodies of the loyal".

By sunset it was all over, and the pit no more than a scar on the valley floor. In the castle all men made carous-el, but in the cot of the peasant there was black despair and the agony of bereavement.

"Oh, Mistress.....Mistress" he sobbed, "cursed be this hand that took up arms against ye! They lied in their teeth, the rogues, when they said ye were an enemy o' the people o' England. Me an' mine are yours till we die, Mistress. Do wi' us as ye list".

Elizabeth smiled. "Tom Brewster, you are a whole man. Go your ways, Tom, you are your fellows. I swear that from this day you shall have no cause to hate my house".

Throughout the next hour the scene was repeated many times, the gratitude of the people of Echyngham drowning her in protestations of loyalty. She watched them as they stood, men and women alike, gazing with happy eyes at the parchment that most of them could not read, until the few who had a smattering of letters unlocked the contents to them. They were freemen, no longer serfs, chattels, to work until she chose to let them rest. They were freemen, free to sell their labour to the highest bidder; but most continued to serve her. But this was the decision of a free man, and not of a slave. Roger had oft-times told her: "One free man is worth six serfs". He had been right and she hopelessly wrong. It grieved her that so many had had to die to bring her to this conclusion but that is how it is with people born into privilege. They learn slowly, painfully, as she had herself.

When it was all over she spoke again. "There remains one thing.....Richard of Bellhurst".

People fell silent, happy smiles frozen on their faces. Because nobody answered her, she repeated her question. Then, proud in his new status, Brewster shuffled forward: "What would you, Mistress?" he asked, unhappily. "This Richard has been a friend to us.....during your absence in Lunnon". It came bravely and the lady smiled. "We would not wish to see harm come to him, outlaw though he be".

"Nor would I, that I do swear. I would make what reparation I may to this Richard. I have looked into the matter of Bellhurst and Echyngham has not been without guilt. I may not restore the wasted years, but I can restore his holding".

"This has a fair sound, Mistress" returned the man carefully, "an' if so be we can come to a knowledge of this Richard, his whereabouts, what then?".

Elizabeth indicated the table. "There remains one parchment. It is made out in his name. If he comes to me at the castle of Glottingham within the space of one month, 'tis his. If he comes not, I shall know he has no interest in my mercy".

"He has men, Mistress. Not so many since your brush with them, not long since, Lamberhurst way; but some. If report of the man be true, he would not abandon them".

"There are many holdings on this and other manors rendered vacant by the recent troubles. There should be no difficulty, arrangements could be made".

Brightening, Brewster turned to glance at the others. "Then, Mistress, an' that be so, we will seek to find some knowledge of where the man lies, and deliver your message". And with that Elizabeth had to be content.

They returned that night to Glottingham, after a survey of what needed to be done to render the manor house habitable. And it was at Glottingham, in not much more than two weeks, that Richard of Bellhurst made his peace with the house of Echyngham, receiving back his franklin's holding. Here he lived until his death, forever bewailing his Emma, and cursing Elizabeth who had killed her in fair fight. To comfort him he had his son, Simon, presented to him by Emma de Berewyck, ten years before. Many years on, into the next century, this Simon was destined to kill Elizabeth de Echyngham even at the moment he fell by her hand. But this was hidden from them.

The Boxhulls lived in apparent amity during the rest of 1381 and the spring of 1382, although the Lady Margaret chafed greatly at being subject to her lord. Her nature was to be up and doing, and not dragging around in a gown or being poised over an embroidery frame. Boxhull knew it very well and grinned. Then in April 1382 comes a messenger bearing a letter from Sir Hugh Calveley, inviting Boxhull to join him at Brest. Boxhull kept his counsel until they were abed, then broke the news to a not totally surprised lady.

"Have to go a-soldiering again" he explained, with much joy, "afore Easter. Braban will go with me. Will not want to, not now, but he will. Now he has land has become a stay-at-home. But he will follow me, if only for friendship's sake. What say you?"

"If it is your wish, husband" she replied, docilely. She dared not say more. There was no call to anger him by letting eagerness show. "But the estate.....".

Boxhull snorted. "Estate me no estates, Meg. You do it well enough, and like it. You hate being subject to me, admit it. You were born to rule. This I know. More, there are too many women in this castle". With that he gave her his shoulder and slept.

It was true of course. Until her house was ready, Elizabeth yet lived at Glottingham. The two sisters together was rather more than Boxhull could cope with. They were never out of each other's company, and female laughter jarred in his ears. Then there was Kate Cralle, who had borne herself so superlatively well in the fight the year before, despite being unhorsed. She formed part of a highly frivolous trio that made the knight's life something of a misery. For him a lady was useful enough for a night's diversion, or as a breeder of sons, but for little else. They were, he thought, inferior to men and of little consequence; although he had to admit that Margaret and Elizabeth were an exception to every rule. In this, as in so much else, he was a man of his time. More, he was a mercenary, a soldier-of-fortune to his fingertips. Responsibility he liked not; he was born to be a freebooter. He sold his sword to the highest bidder, lived but for the day and took what he would, where he would. No man trained under Knollys could be any other.

The day came for Roger's departure, accompanied by a reluctant and pessimistic Braban, and Margaret and Elizabeth watched them go, until they were lost among the trees. Though she knew it not, Margaret would never see her husband again. There had been no "Hold or die" nonsense this time. On his side there was no emotion, just an eagerness to be gone. As Bess would say that evening: "Twas as if he only journeyed to Battle".

Margaret put on a display of regret that was not too much and not too little. A tear glistened in the corner of each eye, and she played the brave wife to perfection. John Knelle, seeing it, squinted into the sun, frowning, lest he laugh aloud. Elizabeth marvelled at her sister's duplicity, greatly admiring the catch in the breath, the heaving bosom, the faltering voice. Margaret laughed lightly: "These are all part of a lady's armoury. How else does she cozen a man?"

Bess laughed. All she said was, as Boxhull became a speck in the distance: "Tis to be hoped there is no new revolt, that is all".

"And if there is, what then, Bess? We will meet it, you and I. I ask you, sister, who was it saved our skins that day? Was it Roger, or any man? Nay, it was a lady, and one my husband despised so roundly. So talk not of revolts to me, but come you in and partake of supper, while we talk over the future".

John Knelle, who overheard the conversation, pulled at his beard and grinned. He thought, here we go again. And why not? Life had been infernally dull at Glottingham since the revolt.

By June 1382 the manor house at Echyngham was complete as far as the private apartments were concerned, although masons were still working on the curtain wall, raising it and doubling its thickness. Bess knew she would not have to sustain a siege, but the improvement was prudent. In her own chambers, the tiling was alternate blue and white, a reflection of the Echyngham arms of 'azure' and 'argent'; within the year the apartments were hung with tapestries and the tiled floors covered with animal skins. As she rode home on the last day of June she was a very happy lady.

Nor was it just her home. She had many plans for her estate, plans which ultimately earned her the name of "the good Lady Elizabeth". Others, less charitable, said cynically: "See what an arrow in the carcase will achieve". This was doing less than justice to a mind singularly fair, by the standards of the time.

She had thought much on the lessons of the revolt for her kind. As a result she realised very early two important factors - that the land was lawless and would continue to be so while the majority of the countryside was covered with forest; and also that the population was increasing and to meet the needs of freemen seeking land something had to be done. She therefore set about providing more land by a programme of forest clearances at the top of the hill, where the road from Echyngham met the London Road. This process was known as assarting and was no new development but it was the first time that the manor of Echyngham had approached the task with any degree of organisation. Nor did Elizabeth leave it to others; she took a personal interest in the project and by the end of two years a wide area had been rendered clear of trees and was being settled. Men called it in her time, The New Village. It made the road safer for travellers but more importantly it provided much land for freemen to rent and work. To Elizabeth de Echyngham, then, we owe the creation of what is now the village of Hurst Green.

Once a week she would ride to Glottingham to eat with her sister, who had initiated a similar project at the village of Munfield. Within the same period land to the north of the village had been cleared and was in cultivation. Men were even beginning to praise Lady Margaret, when the deplorable Harlakenden Affair rocked local society to its foundations.

As all men knew, Lady Margaret's needs were varied, but they could be supplied from her household. There was the loving Kate Cralle, with her long, golden hair and firm breasts. And there was John Knelle, used to being called upon when his mistress craved masculine attention. They had a routine, Lady Margaret and he. Every night he would make perambulation of the castle, checking its security. Then, before retiring, he would report to her; and if she looked at him with wide eyes and spoke seductively, he would know. It was to be his lucky night. Or, if she was cool and distant, with her: "Thank you, John. Good night", he went away to his own chamber. He knew that night belonged to Kate Cralle.

Yet sometimes Lady Margaret needed more excitement than could be vouchsafed to her purely by fleshly contact. Essentially an amazon, she liked to ride out and scoop up her own bedfellow from the highway. By force of course, that was the essential ingredient. And, of course, her victim had to be gently born. It was a matter upon which she would not compromise. It came on her cyclically, this heat, and on these occasions Knelle would arm her as for war, even down to the flail and axe at her saddle-bow. This was gilding the lily, for she carried a goodly sword on her left hip and a misericord on her right. It was merely to impress the beholder with her power but also to indulge her bellicose nature. So they would ride forth, with Knelle behind her, and the men-at-arms behind him. In normal circumstances Cralle would ride with them but not on these occasions. These were Lady Margaret's personal adventures and she needed not Kate's restraining hand. This was how the Harlakenden Affair began, for Margaret de Boxhull was a very wilful lady indeed.

Thus, one cool but fair day in May 1383 saw them riding towards the London Road, looking for prey. On these occasions the masculine side of Lady Margaret was in control. She would be mighty arrogant, and Knelle spoke only when spoken to. He knew better. He knew his mistress inside and out. He knew the big heart of her, and her dreams. They were old-fashioned, pre-Crecy dreams, of brave deeds and knight-errantry. He stared at her bronze back and shook his head in mock despair. She was strong, athletic, a woman who lived hard and, by God, loved hard. Her well-muscled thighs testified to a lady rarely out of the saddle; her grip was strong as a man's and yet her hand was smooth as became a lady. The secret was in the shoulder muscles; hardly surprising in one who practised warlike exercises frequently. Knelle thought about that terrible fight two years ago when he had been wounded in the arm and near helpless and she had shouted to him to begone and save himself from further hurt. In the chaos he had scarce heard her hoarse entreaty but that she could think of him in the press, when fighting for life, moved him then and moved him now. It was a signal mark of favour. But on this May day she thought not of John Knelle.

Margaret de Boxhull was a true product of the decline of chivalry, where the mania for gallant deeds existed side by side with great brutality. Raised on Malory's tales of legendary Camelot, and in a warlike environment, she could not be other than she was. Small wonder that she had the same dreams as her male counterparts. She had always wanted to face a knight on equal terms and defeat him. She was certain within herself that despite her sex she could do so; admitting the risk to herself she yet yearned for the experience with passion. Her heart burned at the thought. It is difficult in our own time to understand such longings, which are held to be detestable, yet to her they were ambitions proper to the knightly caste from which she

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sprang. It was not that she was bloody-minded. True, she had killed peasants but it brought her no pleasure. It was merely a social duty, for the protection of her privileged status. As an act of policy it brought no satisfaction. Even the squire she had slain, Hoods Corner way, though gently born, had not been her rank. He had been a strong, game man, but it was not enough. Dear God, she prayed, send me a knight.

As she rode at the head of her men that day she thought of other matters. There had been many abductions of ladies of late, not married ladies like herself, but heiresses like Elizabeth. Or dearest Ursula. Her lips twitched at the thought of anyone abducting those two ladies. But it happened frequently. She had heard that in the Parliament of Edward III complaint had been made of estate-jumping, carrying off of heiresses and breaches of the peace by gentlemen and their retainers as a new and growing evil. It was true, as she well knew. The complaint was only about ladies of her class. Peasants did not matter. They had few rights. Yet they must have feelings too, she thought. For a peasant wench rape was an everyday hazard, either by their own kind or their betters. After all, she herself had been raped in the high turret chamber at Echyngham by her husband, not without a measure of co-operation of course. She smiled to herself at the memory. But it was not always so.

Rape was an everyday occurrence, an occupational hazard for women both high and low. In her class it merely hastened marriage, as Roger's big hand, thrust beneath her gown, had hastened hers. It was it just rape. Destruction of women was an everyday event. In 1379, as Lady Margaret well remembered, Sir John Arundel, on his way to war in France, had raided a nunnery at Southampton, carrying off sixty young nuns for the pleasure of his men. Once on board ship raping began, and when a storm blew up, to lighten the load the young women were tossed, screaming, into the raging sea.

Naturally, priests and monks were among the greatest offenders, for the Church saw in woman not only the menace of Eve but a reminder of the ancient religion of the Mother Goddess which lay only just below the surface of man's consciousness, and to which Lady Margaret gave secret allegiance. Lady Margaret knew that this was behind men's hatred of her, and why she had been marked down for destruction "as the shame of her sex" yet what freedom did she permit herself that her male counterparts did not claim? But she was a woman, an inferior being, a non-person as Ursula had always said. Small wonder that the Church abetted secular bigotry.

Ay, she thought, churchmen were great offenders. Thus, in 1403, a monk of Rothersbridge, one John Holbom (a man not unknown to Margaret) was taken in a wood with a married woman and not long after Margaret's time Rothersbridge Abbey would receive a pardon for "all kinds of robberies, murders, rapes of women, rebellions, insurrections, felonies, conspiracies, etc".

These were the facts of life in her day. Much of the abbey's revenues came from hospitality, or as we should say now, "paying guests" and monks were but men under their habit. Ladies travelled much, and the temptation was always there. Secular priests, too, took advantage of their position as confessors to women to copulate with them, and not only women, but little girls. Ursula had laughed as she retailed some of her uncle's peccadilloes, treating it all as a jest and a matter of no consequence. Later Saint Bernardino was to write: "Albeit the life of many clerics be full of crimes, yet there resideth in them a holy and venerable authority". This was generally accepted and being a fourteenth century lady, Lady Margaret accepted it also.

Priests and monks were rarely proceeded against. It is true that John Holbom was beaten "to the effusion of blood" but more often the punishment was transference to another house of their Order. Secular priests were moved to another parish; it was that simple. And indeed, as Lady Margaret knew well, being educated and very intelligent, women were in a no-win situation, for if they submitted to priestly importunities they stood the risk of being killed by their husbands; and if they did not, as Petrus Cantor wrote so graphically in 1190, they stood great risk of being "accused as heretics and condemned to the fire". Thinking of this, Margaret de Boxhull was conditioned to compassion for her sex and moved to a generous impulse on that May day, especially as it fell in so well with her craving for honour.

As her party moved slowly along the London Road they passed the Abbey, before coming to the bridge that carried the road over the river. On the hill above was the parish church of Salehurst, a fine sight then as now. By the river a peasant girl was gathering rushes, her kirtle tucked into the cord that served her as a belt. Lady Margaret stopped her men, watching the girl's little knife flash as she garnered the rushes. It was then that she saw, a bowshot to the west, and coming along the path by the river a mounted man, encased in steel even as she was in bronze. Her heart lurched in her breast, burning with excitement. Had God heard her prayer? She pictured herself, in the manner of her kind, as a Knight of the Round Table, dedicated to the protection of the weak. He was clearly a gentleman, a knight. Should she challenge him? All it took was courage, and she had that in abundance. He would not deny her. He dare not, for honour's sake. She could read his arms on his jupon but knew them not, despite her skill in heraldry. She read them to herself - 'azure, a fess ermine between three lions erased, or'. It meant nothing to her, she could not place a name to the arms. Well, it mattered not, sufficiently noble he was, and worthy of her steel. She raised her hand imperiously, and Knelle spurred to her side. He guessed what she had in mind.

"Know you his arms, John? They are new to me".

"Nay, I know them not". He hesitated. "You would try a passage of arms with yon knight?"

"'Twas in my mind".

"'Twould be a goodly deed".

"As you say, John".

She dismissed him and he backed his horse. A quite superb lady, he thought. Service with the Wardieus had been so dull; service with Lady Margaret was never that. And she would come to no harm. It was rare for anyone as heavily armoured as she to suffer more than a bruise or two, unless crushed by a mace or a weakness found in the harness, which he knew was not possible. He had seen to her arming himself.

Matters then moved with great speed. She was still forming within her mind a suitable phrase for the occasion when the girl clambered up the bank, her arm full of rushes. The man had doubtless been regarding her for some time, for now he spurred, bending down and effortlessly scooping the girl up to his saddle. The rushes scattered, she screeched her terror and struggled impotently, her brown legs beating the air. But she still had her knife and with it she sought to find a weakness in his armour. The man laughed as it snapped on his breastplate. The girl went limp and lay unheeding on his saddle bow.

This altered matters. Lady Margaret was capable of a generous impulse, even towards a peasant's brat. Had her father not told her that it was her duty to protect the weak, if it could be done without damaging her prerogatives? Not that she felt anything for the girl. But today it suited her to get angry. The girl needed champion and she, Margaret de Boxhull, lady of many manors, would deign to be it. She touched her horse with the spurs.

The man, busy with lecherous thoughts, had not seen her party and it was not until she was halfway to him that the sound of hooves recalled him to reality. A lone rider, one of his kind, an equal. He grunted, tossing the girl from him; she rolled down the bank. If Margaret could not recognise his arms, he read her name and quality easily. He laughed. The Boxhull woman, the she-wolf who liked to play the man. Well, she should be taught such a lesson, in front of her men, that she would never forget. It would humiliate such a one. But stay. She needed killing, he had been told, a monstrous traitor to her sex. It might be, it might well be, he thought evilly. The bitch would die. But she had a reputation, a quite unnatural valour. Yet she was only a wench after all, and he could easily kill her. With the thought he drew his sword with eagerness.

Lady Margaret saw, but did not stop her charge. The die was cast and it was not in her nature to change her mind once she had committed herself. The flail was good enough for this creature, she decided, hefting it purposefully. She treated his sword with disdain, carefully measuring the distance between them. His blade struck her bascinet a glancing blow. She did not even blink but whirled the flail; then leaning forward slightly in the saddle, as she had so often in practice, she halted the trajectory. The spiked ball struck the side of his helmet with great velocity and stunned, he fell back in the saddle. The horse reared and he fell limply, and with a prodigious splash, disappeared into the river. It was incredible how easy it had been. Even had she wanted to, she could not have done anything. She sat staring at the water until it calmed and she could see his body laying on the rock-strewn bed of the river. She had slain a knight in personal combat! What else could life hold for her now? For dead he was, drowned ignominiously. The thought pleased her. The animal's life had been snuffed out, and what of it? The combat had been fair. He had deserved his fate. She replaced the flail and reached out to calm the man's horse. A good mount, it would join her own stable. She turned, raising her hand. Knelle galloped up, eyes alight.

"By the Mass! 'Twas bravely done! He bit off more than he could chew with your Ladyship!". Manlike, he was enthusiastic. It was honey to hear him speak so, for Knelle was a battle-hardened man. "But may have trouble, if he has kin. Whoever he be, he must have some".

Sublimely she replied: "Will meet it if it comes, John. But take his horse. 'Tis my due, having slain him in combat. 'Tis certain he will need it no longer. His harness too, could I but reach it. But let be. 'Tis not worth the effort. Let him rot where he lies. She was a hard woman, Knelle reflected.

"And his sword?". He pointed to where it lay on the river bank, having fallen from the man's nerveless fingers. "'Tis a good blade".

"You wish it, John?". There was a bubble in her voice. "Then take it, man, and welcome. It shall be my gift".

That was the best of serving her. You picked up many perks of this nature. He thanked her, grinning.

Margaret had quite forgotten the cause of the affray until the girl, having clambered up the bank, stood by her stirrup. The girl curtsied to the great lady. Then, timidly: "He is..... is.....".

Margaret raised her visor, and stared down, lips twitching with amusement. "Ay, girl, he is slain. You are well revenged". The seemed savagely pleased. "What is your name, girl?".

"Agnes, an' it please your ladyship".

"What else besides?".

"Just Agnes. My father be Tom Pettitt".

"Well, Agnes, recover your rushes and go your ways".

Closing her visor, the lady turned her horse, acknowledging the girl's grateful curtsy. With toughness of mind she dismissed the man from her memory and turned to the more important business of finding herself a bedfellow for the night. As craving as she was for honour, her body needed nourishment too.

Eventually she found her prey at the top of the hill, beyond Salehurst church. A well set-up young man he was, on a brown horse, dressed as a squire, but carrying a lute on his saddle-bow. It looked hopeful, but first things first thought she. When asked if he was gently born, he bridled: "I am Geoffrey de Coveling" he announced proudly, "Squire of the Body to John de Montfort, Duke of Brittany, Count of Montfort and Earl of Richmond. An you, lady, as I take it.....".

Margaret smiled broadly, regarding him kindly through the vents of her helmet. She liked his spirit and approved of blood-pride. "I am Margaret de Boxhull, of whom you may have heard, and I invite you to spend the night with me at my castle of Glottingham".

Had he declined, she would have taken him, as tenderly as was possible, but he bowed from the saddle, well pleased. He had heard of her and knew precisely what was expected of him. To bed with such a one would honour him. He was a small gentleman and she a great lady. He thought how he could crow over his fellows, the stories he could tell! His cock swelled at the thought of entering her. Men said she was lovely but very dangerous in and out of bed. Well, he thought, we will see; and he rode with her very willingly. After all, as well as a warrior, she was also a practised whore, as he had heard tell. The lady pointed to his lute. "You will show me of your skill later?".

He turned a grinning, impish freckled face to the bronze figure. "'Tis so my hope, lady. I will also play my lute, if it be your wish!".

Her laughter was full throated and joyous. She yearned to have him empty himself into her. The secret parts of her body leapt at the thought and she felt the delicious wetness she knew so well. "Why, sir" she murmured softly, but a trifle breathlessly, "'twas your lute I had in mind".

"Is it so indeed? I beg your ladyship's pardon. I thought you spoke of country matters".

"I know it. You are a wicked fellow, it seems to me".

"I am, lady, a man".

"It pleases me, sir. Content you. My needs are as great as your own seem to be". She eyed his distended breeches with amusement. "But for now I think I should plunge you in the nearest stream. You seem in great need of a douche to cool your ardour".

Behind her, Knelle chuckled. Most men envied him his place. Who would not, he thought. And he would not trade it for all the money in the world.

It was during the meal that Lady Margaret finally discovered who it was she had slain. It occurred to her that the young squire, who was proving such a joyous companion, might well discuss unto her the identity of the man.

"I met a knight on the road today" she began in complete truth, but his arms were not known to me. It may be that you have encountered the man in your journeyings with the Duke". The young man considered the heraldic details with half-closed eyes. Then he took a long draught of wine.

"Why, my lady, it seems to me that I have seen those arms, and it sticks in my mind that it is a Kentish knight who rode with us when we warred in France. A fine warrior, as I recall, though ladies of mine acquaintance had no love for the man". Margaret smiled her silky smile. "By name, Sir John Harlakenden. He was squired always by his brother and the twain hired their swords out to any great lord who sought them. The brother was equally expert as his brother, a most doughty and expert man. Yet it always seemed to me, young as I was, that the man was not rich, as are you, my lady". He studied the tapestries with which the chamber was adorned, then his eyes dropped to the gold goblets.

The lady's eyes twinkled. "Mayhap impecunious?"

"So 'tis said".

"And yet today he seemed well equipped, this knight".

"It may be. I heard he had been fighting in Spain. And last year he was at the battle of Rosbecque. An expert man can find good pickings when so employed". He smiled proudly. "Mine own harness was taken from a French knight who I slew".

Lady Margaret was pleased to know that her victim was a fighting man so highly regarded. It made her deed all the more honourable, she being a lady. Inwardly she preened herself. There were many men who were dubbed knight without sufficient revenues to maintain the dignity and had to turn mercenary, she knew. Harlakenden was clearly such a one. Further, it joyed her to know that her bedfellow had such prowess in the field. Every lady loves a brave man.

Very little more was said, for both were eager for the fray and Geoffrey de Coveling, being a healthy young man, gave her the greatest satisfaction. He was a revelation to her, and she found herself asking whether he often came this way. The wistfulness in her question enchanted him. "Alas, my lady, but rarely. My duties to my master do not permit. Although my father holds land of the manor of Rothersbridge. This journey is merely to deliver a letter to the Belknaps at Beckley, nigh unto Rye".

She sighed regretfully. "'Tis a pity, sir. Your duties are in London?"

"Ay, my lady, that being where the duke does mostly reside".

"It may be that you have knowledge of my sister, the Lady Elizabeth de Echyngham?"

His eyes shone. "She is your sister? But ay, 'tis so. Both very gallant ladies in truth. I saw her once only before the revolt and was in awe of her, I confess. A most formidable lady". Margaret smiled proudly. That was Bess right enough. "But my master I recall, speaks of her highly, even boasting of her friendship".

At this rate the night sped by very sweetly. "Come, Geoffrey" she cooed, "your hands have magic in them. And not only your hands". They laughed softly together and made the sweetest love.

And in the morning she would take no recompense for her hospitality from this fine young fellow. How could she, when her whole body sang with delight. The young man rode on his way as proud as if he had captured a king in battle. With a sad smile, she watched him go, waving from the battlements, her blue gown rippling in the slight breeze. He bowed to her profoundly from the saddle.

It was about three weeks after the events described above when Kate Cralle shook her friend into waking. Margaret stretched like a lioness, and yawned. "What ails you, Kate?" she murmured, sleepily.

Kate had been up betimes, despite their frolics of the night, and looked white and anxious. "Meg.....Master Knelle says to look from your chamber window. There are men.....".

And men there were indeed. Margaret smiled disparagingly and laughed aloud. They were a scratch lot. The Harlakendens were not rich, she thought smugly. Obviously the knight's body had been recovered from the river, that is what brought these dogs to her door. She was silent for a long moment. Then: "Give me that robe, Kate, then send John to me".

She was seated on the bed in a nonchalant pose when Knelle came through the door, legs crossed and propping herself up by her left arm. "Lady Margaret, as I foretold, we have trouble".

"It worries you, John?"

"Does it not you?"

"Not a jot".

"But Lady Margaret.....".

"The drawbridge is up?"

"Ay".

"The postern closed?"

"Ay".

She stifled a yawn. "Then, 'tis no great matter. Thirty men drawn from the plough and the kitchen, poorly armed. Tush man, we can sweep them before us like chaff".

"It may be. But Master Henry Harlakenden is not a matter for jest".

"You know him?"

"I know of him. He is a man of war. A veteran of Najara and Rosbecque. Built large, will take some disposing of".

Margaret's teeth bared in a winning smile, while her heart beat fast with excitement. "Then he is an old man, sure? Fifty as I judge".

"About that. But he is an expert man. And has come to slay you".

"That is but fair, seeing that I most happily slew his brother". Knelle shrugged, exasperation struggling with admiration. "Would offer to do this thing for you, but he would not meet me. 'Tis your life he seeks".

"I do not hide behind my gown, as you know, John Knelle. I need not your protection". She was mild but dangerous. "You have spoken with him?"

"A few words only from the gate tower".

"Discuss unto me".

"He seeks personal combat unto death".

"That can be met. There was more?".

"The rest was insult".

She laughed softly. "I will bear it in mind". Levering herself up, she spoke decisively: "Leave me, John, but stay within call. When I have donned my mail, shall need your service. Give orders that my charger is ready, protected. Nay, hold. Prepare his brother's mount. 'Tis a good beast. Not to mention that it will anger him". Knelle grinned. "And study him carefully and report to me".

Kate Cralle, who had hovered nearby during this exchange, already held the black suit of mail. Her face was flushed, her eyes dancing, wishing it was she who was riding forth to destroy a hated man. Meg eyed her good-humouredly, understanding only too well. How Kate had changed since the revolt, she thought.

Lady Margaret donned her mail as happily as she would have done a gown. Nay, happier. She hummed a tune as she did so, even though she was going to face danger. Fear was not built into her; or rather, her father's training had drubbed it from her. It even amused her to know that the countryside would rejoice if she fell. The countryside, she decided, would be disappointed. Cralle laced up the tunic and set the coif around the head, gurgling all the while. Then Knelle was called; and he asked her which armour she favoured. She said Jane Alard's. It was a fine harness. As he slipped her into the pointed steel feet she asked if he had aught to report.

"I watched him closely, Lady Margaret. Item, 'tis not good armour as is this". He tapped the foot with grimy fingernail. "Item, when he returned my salute it seemed to me that there was a gap in his plate of about a sword's thickness. When he raises his arm to strike, 'twill show again". She smiled her thanks. "Just mail, if you take my meaning. His weak spot".

"I take your meaning well, John".

"There is a message. He begs you to make haste. He yearns to slay the biggest whore south of Thames".

"Says he so? I must remember it". Outwardly placid, yet her eyes smouldered. "John Knelle, I know not what I would do without you. But as to haste, that is in my gift. The longer he waits, the better. So hurry not, my friend".

It was no small matter, indeed, preparing a knight for combat but Knelle was expert and she trusted him completely. Being equipped for the field took a great fund of patience for the knight, with a great trust of the squire.

"Which weapon favour you?".

"The axe, I think. Ay, the axe". Knelle repressed a shiver. She was deadly with it. And he marvelled at it. "The men are ready?".

"Ready and horsed by now".

"'Tis well". By now the steel plate rested comfortably on her hips and he turned to the breastplate and back plate, buckling them firmly together. Then came the shoulder and arm protection.

Knelle glanced at her as he was fiddling with the straps. "Will need a gorget for this work". She nodded, placidly; this was serious business indeed. It was personal war, which it was a

They wheeled their horses and attacked again. She did not miss this time, and she heard him grunt, saw his sword waver. But something told her that she would need all her expertise, all her courage to finish this man. Her heart burned as she thought of the tomb. It was not fear, but a stimulant. He had not struck her this time, her blow had been too fierce, numbing his shoulder. But when she attacked again, he was ready for her.

His sword smashed into her gorget, nearly knocking her from the saddle. Had her feet not been so secure in the stirrups she would indeed have fallen. From behind Knelle saw her slide sideways, the steel toe of her right foot pointing skyward. Lady Margaret retched. Her neck felt as if it had been broken, but she had suffered no scathe. It merely felt like it. For some seconds she was vulnerable, helpless, axe hanging limply from her wrist by its leather thong. Through the vents of her bascinet she could see the sky; in pain, her eyes were wide and staring. She dimly heard his roar of triumph and felt two massive blows that smashed into her bascinet. She was dazed and knew how close to death she was. Another blow took her to the edge of insensibility and darkness. Her brain told her she was slain and she wanted nothing more than to fall to the ground. Her strength was gone; she was done for and knew it. She lay there, half on, half off the saddle, stricken, incapable of co-ordinated thought, much less co-ordinated action. Death in combat did not worry her; it was an end to which she had been trained. This was a class matter and she welcomed it, yearned for it even. And then, through the dark mists that started to envelop her, she saw Ursula's sweet face, anxious now. "Fight, Meg.....damn you, Meg, fight. Your time is not yet". The words, quite clear, echoed in her head, as in an empty chamber. Light stabbed her darkness, recalling her to life. With a groan she forced herself upright, regaining the saddle; turning her horse, she even found time to push her right foot back into the stirrup from which it had partially slipped. He continued to belabour her, cursing foully; but the tide had turned. He had let her recover and his rage was terrible. She was weak, dolorously weak; but as her brain cleared, she was herself seized with a cold fury that brought strength coursing back into her limbs. She drove in recklessly under the flailing sword, lips drawn back in a snarl of hate for the male animal who had nearly finished her. This might be her last chance. It was kill or be killed and life was suddenly sweet. With all her strength she brought the axe down, spike first, unerringly into the gap in his armour. The punishment she took suddenly ceased. The spike disappeared into the body entirely, and he gave a roar like a wounded boar. But he was more than wounded. His sword fell from nerveless fingers. Her axe fell, blade first, again, and again and yet again, splitting the poor steel, and burying itself up to the socket in his shoulder. She wrenched it free, hearing his shriek, that fell to a whimper. She had no pity, not she. The winds of death had passed too close. His blood leapt at her, splashing upon her breastplate. She wheeled her horse, partly to avoid it, partly to give her time to twist the axe in her hand. Henry Harlakenden was near death but even so his hatred did not retreat an inch.

"I am slain.....you she-wolf, may God damn your soul to everlasting fire. In the name of sweet Jesu.....despatch me".

"Very well, sir" came her croak, "I send you to join your brother".

The axe rose and crashed down; his bascinet crumpled like tin, as the spike entered his brain. The big body hit the ground with a crash, and spreadeagled itself monstrously. It was brutal but necessary.

Knelle uttered something that sounded suspiciously like a sob of pure relief as he watched her demolition of her enemy. He gloried in her. Men said she had no heart. This was not true, but in serious business like this she had no womanly pity. The man had come close to settling her business for ever and she had no remorse then or later.

The man who did duty as Harlakenden's servant galloped up and reined in by her, mouthing maledictions against her and her house. She was too great a lady, too bloodproud to deign to reply. He was far beneath her. He beckoned two fellows forward, who started to lift the dead man. But the lady knew the laws of chivalry and cried: "Hold!". She was cold, arrogant. "By the laws of combat, I am entitled to the arms and harness of the vanquished". The men gaped at her and the Kent man signed himself, believing himself in the presence of a witch. She laughed contemptuously: "Though, by Our Lady, I know not what use I could make of so poor a harness. Take your master and go; and let no man ride against Margaret de Boxhull again. He was a brave man but foolish". She then raised her voice, enjoying her triumph. "Let all men heed me. I am the daughter of Sir William de Echyngham, descended from Reinbert, who received this land at the Conquest, and the best blood of Normandy. Those who ride against Margaret de Boxhull, ride to their deaths. Mark it well. Now go".

She watched them ride away slowly until they were lost in the trees. Only then did she turn, and led her men slowly back to the castle, to cheers from her men as she rode in. They had seen her laying helpless on her horse and had reckoned their beloved captain lost to them. That she was not appeared to them a miracle. In the courtyard she dismounted, tossing the reins of her horse to Knelle. Only then did she raise her visor and they looked on her white and drawn face. She smiled crookedly, acknowledging their approval. "John" she said to Knelle, "see the axe is cleansed of his blood, and the horse stalled, then attend me at your leisure". She turned from him and walked slowly up the stair with no more concern than if she had returned from a boar hunt.

The men stared after her, then at each other. "A good captain" quoth one, "thinks of her men". And another: "And valiant. Have known none other like her, by the Mass!". Yet another: "Nor is it likely you will. They come no finer than Lady Margaret". John Knelle could find no grounds for disagreement. In Italy he had met a female leader of mercenaries with her courage but in England his mistress stood alone.

Gaining her chamber, the lady found a much distressed Kate Cralle who had been crying. "Dear Meg....." was all she could say, before running into the steel arms. Then: "But, oh Meg, your face is much bruised".

"Is it so, Kate" she murmured hoarsely, kissing her, "it surprises me not. Tell me, did you think you had lost Meg?".

"I did so".

"To tell you the truth, Kate, your bedfellow nearly died out there. Would you have grieved?".

"You see my tears" came the reproachful reply, "you know how I do love you".

"Ay, Kate, I know it well". She sat down with some caution. "But I wanted to hear you say it".

"But, Meg" Cralle gushed, "it must be fun to fight like that".

"Ay, if you win". But she smiled, remembering that she had said the same when young, and Ursula had said it to her. "Would you like to fight so?".

"Oh, yes, Meg".

"By all the Saints! You have altered in two years, Kate. I found you timid, and I see you as brave as a lion. How comes it?".

"Example and training, as you know well. You have taught me not to be affeared".

Margaret smiled. "Well, we will see. But for now, Kate, pour three goblets of Gascony. I expect Master Knelle at any moment".

When he came to her, he found his dread mistress seated calmly on the settle, with her victim's blood still on her. She stared into her wine, then looked up with a thin smile. Pointing to the other goblet, she told him to sit. "'Tis good wine, this. I said we would drink together, did I not?".

He sighed: "Ay, my lady, you did that. But I feared, out there, that it would not be so".

Her smile was without humour: "'Twas close enough".

"You took no scathe?".

"Thanks to this Italian steel, none. Yet it hurts me to swallow. But 'twill pass".

"A shrewd blow, a sore dunt. Will have a famous bruise, I doubt not". He rose and inspected the steel. "Ay, the armourer can hammer that out. A fine harness".

"Ay. That fellow fought well".

"And died well".

"As a soldier".

"No regrets, lady?".

"None, John. What would you? Would have slain me, came to do so. And nearly did. Shall sleep no worse for it. Could do nought else. Mayhap this is how it is meant to be. Mayhap we are meant to fight and slay, to claw our way up. Mayhap then it will be as the priests say, a world of peace. But I doubt it, John".

"I, too, my lady". He paused, staring at the wine. "Luck was truly with you this day. The man should never have let you escape".

She smiled: "Thank you, John!".

"You know well I speak soldier to soldier" he grinned. "For sure I held you slain. 'Tis certain you knew not the day or the hour. Is't not so, my lady?".

"'Tis so, John. You understand well. I saw my tomb and yearned for it. I wanted to drop. I was much stricken".

"Ay, the feeling is known to me. In battle I have been thus stricken. When the strength goes from you, your enemy may have his will with you. But he took too much time. Shame to him, a man of war".

"Ay, I was set to fall and cared not".

"That is what priests and such understand not. 'Tis so easy to die if you have to, one embraces the tomb. I may say that to a fellow soldier, a knight, even though she be a lady. You understand these things".

Her heart burned at hearing him talk so. It was like drinking deep of mulled wine. "Your tongue flatters".

"Nay, I flatter not. I speak no more than is gospel. You are the bravest lady I have known, with all respect to Lady Elizabeth and Mistress de Ukkefeld, honoured be her memory. I do love a soldierly wench". He looked across at Kate Cralle with a grin. "And now we have another such. Kate has improved out of all recognition. I stand proud of her". It was a gallant speech, and unlooked for, since he disliked Cralle heartily. Yet he knew it would please Lady Margaret.

Cralle's eyes sparkled and coloured to the roots of her hair. Margaret laughed. "I too, John. And you say true, Kate here has the makings of a very brave lady and companion-in-arms".

"Ay, but out there, knowing you for lost, I was sick at heart. I know not whether I could have obeyed you, and let him escape, had you been truly slain".

She knew he spoke out of love for her, from a full heart. "Your feelings do you credit, John" she remarked gently. "But an order given must be obeyed, even if she who gives it lies dead. Remember, as well as your loving friend, I am also your mistress".

"And yet....."

"I understand you well. The sight of Margaret de Boxhull lying slain would make you forget your duty. I am deeply touched by your fidelity, John, for I know you love me well. It please me mightily".

He nodded. "And now, Lady Margaret, will you not lay aside your harness, and let me cleanse you of the fellow's blood?".

She poured herself yet more wine to ease her throat. "Not so, John. Bess will be here anon". Her lips twitched. "My condition will interest her, I think".

He grinned delightedly. He marvelled, as ever, at the hardihood of her. "I will then about my duties, lady, and will disarm you when you call. I count it an honour to serve you".

"Not to mention" whispered Cralle, when he had gone, "I had quite determined to avenge you. Had already given Thomas Wenham the order to bring my harness, when you recovered". She had had her own squire for two years and Meg was not surprised. "Ay, I would have buckled on mine armour and slain the dog. Or joined you on the other side".

Greatly moved, Meg took her hand. "For me, Kate, you would have done that?".

"Most joyfully. The mascles of Cralle would have ridden to the rescue. Better me than a man like Knelle".

Elizabeth said something similar, but in more sisterly terms when she rode in. Holding her sister at arms length, before kissing her, she carolled: "By the Saints, Meg, I would I had been here. I verily believe that you, I and Kate Cralle could ride against the Turk and free the Holy Places". Her eyes shone. "And you killed the dog, did you sister? 'Twas a gallant deed, in truth".

"And yet, Bess, your Meg nearly died".

"Tish, Meg! And likewise Tush. Is not the danger part of the attraction, sister? If we want to live as we do, we must of necessity accept what the end will be, is't not so? So, tell me not that you nearly died. Tell me rather that you triumphed over the animal. In truth, we are the most fortunate of ladies, to be rich and free of men's control".

"'Tis true enough, Bess".

"But mark this, Meg. While I commend your great courage, it is in my mind that this affair of the Harlakendens.....you will live to regret it".

"How so?".

"Now, come, sister. You know how men regard us. As a danger to be destroyed. Now, here is you, killing two fighting men, not without difficulty you say, but comprehensively. Do you not see, this will infuriate men against you? I make a prophecy, sister. Nay, I make two. Item, you will never be free from challenges till you die. Item, both you and I will die violent deaths".

"Oh, as to that, Bess, and as regards myself, I have been told that, years since, by a wise-woman".

"Then you may go bail that it is so. Our swords will never be out of our hands until the end. And in the end they will destroy us. It cannot be otherwise".

Meg smiled her truculent smile: "Do not suppose that troubles you, Bess. It troubles not me".

"Nay, I would rather die on steel, than of disease. I have seen some of the ways folk die, and they attract me not at all. Much better to drop from a sword thrust, or go down before a mace, or even be impaled on a halberd, than die of the plague or some other nauseous disease".

"Ay, we are much alike, you and I. And I simply will not accept the restrictions that men would place upon my freedom of action. I will fight to the death to keep it".

"I know it well, sister. And Bess will never put her neck under any man's foot. But be warned. Ladies hate us equally, and that is sad. Instead of making common cause with us, they refuse us entry to their house. Tell me, Meg. Has any lady given you time o' day?".

"Never".

"Nor will they. They are jealous of our freedoms, and so make common cause with their men. 'Tis sad".

"And thus are we outcasts". She smiled in that hard little way peculiar to her. "Then, Bess, it behoves us to enjoy ourselves while we may, seeing that we are under sentence of death".

"Indeed.....and speaking of which, think you ever of Ursula?".

"The day does not go by but my spirit makes obeisance to hers".

"Is it indeed so" Elizabeth said softly. "She was a worthy lady".

There was a long pause, during which time Lady Margaret struggled with herself. Then she reached out and took her sister's hand. She spoke very precisely. "Bess, do you believe that the dead can return to guide the living in moments of dire peril?".

"I do so fervently believe, sister. Do you doubt it?".

"Not after today, Bess. Harken to me. Today, in the fight, I was near destroyed. Beaten back on mine horse, the world was black around me. I had accepted this was the end. I was weak and completely at the man's mercy. The end of my rope. You see my face and its suffering, the bruises grow yellow do they not?".

"Ay, Meg, they do, but.....".

"In my agony, comes Ursula to me, telling me to fight and that my time was not yet. I tell you true. I owe my life to my sweet Ursula. It was so clear, Bess. It was her voice in my head. 'Damn you, Meg, fight' quoth she, 'your time is not yet' and I took

a hold on life, and mine axe. Believe you this?"

Elizabeth was moved almost to tears. "Ay, I believe it, Meg. Hark you to this. I have never told you but the night before the battle with the peasants, I slept, as you will recall, on the settle for an hour or so. While I slept comes our father to me, our dead father, mark me. You'll mind how he used to stand with his arms folded, frowning at us, when we displeased him? So was he then. 'Bess, tomorrow you will fall in battle. You will live but you will be wounded' says he. 'I expect you to prove yourself my very daughter and bear it nobly'. He then looked upon me sternly, as was his wont, and I woke on a start. And you know well it came about even as he said".

"And you bore it nobly, like an Echyngham". Bess flushed her great pleasure.

"Well, Meg, you may well see why I believe that Ursula came to you in your extremity". They looked long upon each other in sisterly affection. "And speaking of Ursula, Meg, where is dear Kate I see her not. And yet she shapes well. When I consider what you have made of her, Meg, what she was and what she is now, I do truly marvel".

Margaret smiled, nodding: "She has promised to join us for our meal. But soft, I hear her now. That is surely her laughter in the passage".

And it was indeed.

The Lady Margaret believed her sister's prognostications without demur. She knew well enough that at Echyngham, Bess, secure behind her thick stone walls, was gradually pushing back the tide of hostility; yet still she stared out at the world through the vents of her helmet cynically, and with the utmost suspicion. It was not the peasants. They were nothing. The hostility came from their own kind, territorial magnates like themselves. They felt threatened, these men. If women were allowed to assume masculine rights and prerogatives, where would it end? Bess saw all of this very clearly. It was not moral condemnation; there was no thought in their minds that two gentlemen should not settle quarrels in this way. In the next century, the aristocracy was virtually to wipe itself out in bloody factional strife. What caused horror was that a lady should do it, stepping outside the norms of social behaviour. Lady Margaret therefore kept her guard up in no uncertain measure, and it was as well she did. She had many callers and not all of them came to savour the delights of her body.

Happily, however, not all her callers thirsted for her blood so that she had to venture forth and defend her life. Some came out of curiosity, unable to believe the stories about her. They came in disbelief and went in astonishment. These were the callers that Lady Margaret enjoyed; the others were just a painful reminder of the fact that if she wanted to live as a man, she had to act as a man in all matters appertaining to courage and honour.

Thus, one warm autumn day she was warned that one came, well attended, but with no obvious warlike intent. She raised one aristocratic eyebrow and waited on events. The arms, viewed from afar, she did not know but on arrival the old man announced himself, through his servants, as Sir Walter Urswyck. Margaret was flattered to receive him, for he was a known man. He had, it is true, only been a squire and could not boast her ancient lineage; but all men spoke of him as a gallant soldier and fine sportsman. John of Gaunt had made him a knight on the field of Najara, and now he was Gaunt's Chief Forester. Margaret had received many northern gentlemen in her time, men who had hunted with Gaunt at Maresfield and had made a detour in their road to the north to see this famous lady. Naturally, they came with ulterior motives which she accepted cheerfully. The chances were she would never see Roger again and her body was her own. So names like Banastre, Marmion, Dymoke, Blount and Foljambe passed through her chamber. But Urswyck was an old man who came but to see her and retail her doings afterwards. He came to glean with his ears.

She naturally ate with him, privately in her chamber, for her cellar was of equal renown to herself. That day she had excelled herself in the matter of dress. Not knowing the man's age in advance, she had attired herself to please any man, allowing a tantalising glimpse of bosom, a harbinger of pleasures to come. For she was quite shameless over her body. But Urswyck, at his age, had little interest in her charms; he loved to talk and being a Northerner was blunt to excess.

"My Lady" he began, his mouth full of beef, "I well remember the Duke was at Bolingbroke, with other gentlemen, and your name arose".

"Indeed" Margaret murmured, politely.

"Ay, 'tis so. One of our party was very hot against you, taking to yourself freedoms for which nature did not design you, and, being in his cups, talked of essaying your destruction. Whereat the duke, being angered, said that he was not Henry II and you no Thomas Becket. Further, he accused him of being a fool and

no gentleman if he sought the life of such a brave lady. Most of our number agreed that you should be honoured for your valour". She smiled, acknowledging his bow. "Have you met Gaunt, my Lady, Nay? 'Tis strange you have not. For he speaks highly of your sister, the Lady Elizabeth. She is well?".

"Ay, sir. She is at her manor of Echyngham. It may be that you pay your respects to her?".

"Alas! It may not be. I have many duties in the North, but pray give her my respects when you next see her. Gaunt never tires of speaking of her, especially the day she held the lists against all comers, for a jest. She had astonishing strength and dexterity for a lady".

"We were raised toughly by our father. Having no son of an age to succeed.....".

"Ay, I have heard" the old man nodded, vigorously. "Those days in London, before the revolt, were good days. I was younger then and shared Lady Elizabeth's couch on one occasion. But she was much sought after, especially by Sir Simon Burley. But you will know that". The lady nodded, amused. "'Tis a thousand pities she did not return to London after the revolt. A fine body like that should not remain in the countryside. 'Tis made for the Court".

"She has many responsibilities, sir. Our brother is very young and with me she rules his estates".

"And she still plays the soldier?".

"When occasion serves, sir. 'Tis her pleasure, as 'tis mine".

He smiled broadly, not without admiration. "Of this I have heard lady. I likewise heard of the Harlakendens and marvelled greatly. I say no word as to the man's character but he was a brave soldier".

"Say you so?".

"Ay, my lady. You did well. Tell me of't".

There came a delicate shrug. "I only know I slew him, sir, with my flail. And his brother too, when he came seeking redress, this time with mine axe. 'Twas no great matter, I assure you" she lied, airily.

He drew a thick finger through his beard. "And yet they were battle-hardened. I still marvel. Were it in my hands I would dub you knight in truth, although all men regard you as such, for for your merits and attainments".

"I thank you, sir" she smiled. "But my husband is a knight-banneret. 'Tis honour enough. I bear his arms, with mine own quartered, and his banner. I shall not disgrace them".

"No man can believe otherwise, lady".

"And as for Harlakenden" she went on, with her frank gaze, "I fear I have been sparing with the truth. The truth is, I was nearly slain but" - here she laughed - "as you see, I was not. My redoubtable husband could not have done more".

"Sir Roger still soldiers abroad?".

"Still. I have not seen him for a long time".

"Nor wish to, I dare swear" he grinned.

"Sir, the question! she returned, smoothly. Were it so, would I admit it?".

He laughed aloud. "Nay, 'tis not to be expected, especially of 'Margaret o' the Axe', eh? 'Tis a fearsome weapon, as I hear tell, and you wield it with a dexterity most damnable, as I have heard".

Gravely, she explained: "'Tis a matter of practice, sir, and experience. As a soldier yourself you will know the truth of my words". He grinned at her giving herself a status equal to a man. And he did not know why he made mock of it to himself for she spoke no more than the bald truth, as he well knew. She saw the grin but ignored it, although she knew its meaning. "I use it well, this I acknowledge. But in combat, sir, you slay or are slain. 'Tis a fact undoubted, ay? Harlakenden died the hard way because I know no other way to deal with a man desperate to take my life. But I am not sanguinary".

"Yet you are a hard woman, as I have heard tell".

"I am a fighter, sir, so raised. I make no apologies. If a man of my rank thinks he can slay me, he is welcome to try. Many do, more than I would wish. These are not simply passages of arms, but serious business. But I warn them, they can expect no mercy from Margaret de Boxhull".

"Yet you know what the end must be?".

"But of a surety, sir. I am not invincible".

"And you are not troubled?".

"Not I, sir. Better knightly steel than the wasting sickness. 'Tis even my wish and my hope".

He now understood. The lady had a death wish. Well, why not? He toasted her to the dregs. "May that day be long distant, my lady".

"'Tis my hope also, sir".

Later he took his leave with old-fashioned courtesy and she watched him ride away with some satisfaction. Her verbal joust had ended in victory too. She chuckled, as she returned to her chamber.

A week after Urswyck's visit, something occurred in the castle that was quite inexplicable. It will be recalled that John Knelle had the habit, now of long standing, of making perambulation of the castle every night and reporting to Lady Margaret as to the security. It was not necessary, for Glottingham Castle was as close to being impregnable as any house; but he was a conscientious man.

Thus it was that he had crossed the courtyard from the guardroom and placed his foot on the keep stairs when he looked up and saw a figure in bronze armour cross the top of the stairs. There was no doubt of it being a trick of the light. The torches still burned brightly in the sconces and he could not have been mistaken. Yet he could not understand it. He had not armed Lady Margaret and he knew for a fact that she had retired for the night. Nor was it Kate Cralle, wearing her mistress's harness, for she was not in the castle, having gone to Warbleton on family business. He went up the steps two at a time, gaining the corridor at the top in record time. He had not been wrong. The figure was at the end of the passage. Hoarsely he called out. The figure turned, waving gaily, before turning the corner. John Knelle was a brave man in a fight but when faced with the dead, his legs turned to water. He had stared into the face of Ursula de Ukkefeld! Just as he remembered her from her many visits.

To say John Knelle was terrified would not be too far from the truth. The figure had seemed substantial, and yet it could not be. Ukkefeld was dead these several years, rotting in her grave by Salehurst church wall, horribly if gloriously slain. And why had the apparition come that way? The passage led ultimately to the postern gate. Then he remembered, with a chill, that the woman habitually used that entrance, coming as she did through Rothersbridge and along the valley floor, rather than through Munfield. John Knelle signed himself.

How long he leaned against the wall, feeling sick, he did not know, but finally he forced himself to walk to the corner and peer round it. It was empty. The torches burned brightly, comfortingly. There was no reason in the world not to knock on Lady Margaret's door and make his report. He did so, but in some trepidation to be sure. She said: "Enter" as she always did.

He advanced three paces into the chamber as he always did. She smiled, but it seemed to him as if she was smiling, not at him but at something over his right shoulder. He decided he did not wish to look over his shoulder. It was a warm night, yet the chamber was cold enough to make him shiver.

"All's well, my lady, all secure" he advised, stoutly.

"Thank you, John. Good night".

He turned smartly and left, not omitting to note the beauty of her body through the flimsy robe she wore. Outside he leaned against the door, eyes closed, heart galloping. He could not hear properly because of the thickness of the door, but he could have sworn that he heard her say something. What was happening? He knew he had not imagined the whole thing. He hurried away.

She never mentioned the matter to him directly. But some months later she and Kate Cralle led them on a periodic cleansing of woodland, driving into every thicket with drawn swords, when an arrow struck Kate's bascinet. She no longer yelped, did Cralle, when an arrow struck her; she laughed: "I wish we were all vouchsafed the year of our death". Knelle pricked up his ears, though he had not been supposed to overhear. Lady Margaret laughed gaily. Just that and no more. But it made him think deeply. Obviously Cralle knew something he did not. The year of her death, he mused. How could that possibly be? Could the Ukkefeld woman have crossed over to tell her? They had loved each other deeply. And then he remembered her monthly visits to Salehurst church, for the Mass for the repose of Ukkefeld's soul, and how she knelt by Ukkefeld's grave for anything up to half an hour. Did she talk to her dead lover? Had Margaret de Boxhull found a way of communing with spirits? The thought made his scalp crawl.

Then he noticed how careless of her life she was. When there was trouble, she rode out gaily. If she knew the year of her death, this was understandable. That was why such knowledge was unhealthy. And yet Lady Margaret was a dutiful daughter of Holy Church. Not devout, but dutiful, attending to her religious obligations with punctilio. So all was perhaps well. Kate knew, and Elizabeth knew he was sure. But Lady Margaret when he had mentioned the apparition to her, had laughed, calling him a credulous fool, and suggesting that he had been in his cups. Or struck on the head during practice. And there it had been left. Yet he was still a troubled man.

In 1387 Lady Margaret received a letter from Robert Braban. Or to be strictly accurate, a letter from a scrivener and signed laboriously by Braban. Written from Brest, where he was a prisoner in honourable confinement, it told her that her lord and husband "the most renowned warrior, Sir Roger Boxhull" had fallen in battle at the hand of Sir Edward Dalyngrigge, the Captain of Brest, Boxhull fighting on the side of the French. It was addressed to "the Most High and Puissant Lady Margareta de Boxhull at her castle of Glottingham within the county of Sussex" and commenced "Most Honoured and Valiant Lady". This was a touch of the velvet glove, a tactic at which Braban was most adept. She plumped down on a settle and was suddenly aware that the writing on the parchment was blurred. Her hand rose, falteringly, to her eyes and Kate stared curiously.

"'Tis bad tidings, Kate" she murmured, quietly, "I would be alone a while".

Obediently Cralle went but wondering much. Alone, Lady Margaret wept a little, and was surprised at it. True, she had not seen her husband for five years. True, there was no love between them, just lust. Yet he had been her lord, her man; and she had borne his son. And now she was alone.

Of course, he had died as he had wanted, in pursuit of the wealth he craved. He had known the risks he was taking but riches were important to him. She had always laughed at him, she an Echyngham, and now she was sorry for it.

She folded the letter carefully, and locked it away carefully with her private papers. Then she rose and went to the chapel, where she knelt long in prayer.

It was left to Cralle to put matters in perspective. "Meg, at last you are free of man's interference and are really mistress of Glottingham". Her excitement made the lady smile in spite of herself, but she said nothing. For decencies sake she went into mourning, but in her heart she knew that Kate had the right of it. Kate hated men, although she shelved her distaste where the men of Glottingham were concerned, since they represented security. She was also on good terms with Wenham, her squire, and indeed she had to be. Kate was right of course; Margaret was now the owner in law of all she surveyed. What had been true in practice for so long, was now so in fact. It was what the law called her jointure, to sustain her widowhood.

As to her lord's slayer, she was far from conceiving any hatred. He had, in fact, done her a service, though she was too well-bred to say so. When Dalyngrigge took up residence at his "dream-house" that we know as Bodiam Castle, he made the customary courtesy calls on local landowners; and as he bent low over her hand, French fashion, she experienced no frisson of distaste. Roger had been a soldier-of-fortune for whom death was an occupational hazard. So she smiled graciously on her visitor. And Dalyngrigge, who naturally had heard of her, asked to see her armoury and she complied, with a smile. Having first called upon Elizabeth at Echyngham, he thanked God that his own lady, Elizabeth de Wardieux, was not of their stamp. His life would have been rather too exciting for his taste. He had wanted an agreeable lady, agreeable, that is, to his every whim, and not one who would give him back a fearless look, as this one did.

As to Braban, Margaret never saw him again. Yet High Ridge was close enough. He was on good terms with Elizabeth (since his land abutted on hers) and after her, Sir Thomas. Yet the Lady Margaret he detested, as he had since that day in 1381 when she

had stripped his soul bare. And he knew her to be a pervert, no better than the Ukkefeld woman, upon whose memory he spat. She was thus a deplorable woman, but far too powerful to be attacked openly by a small gentleman like him. But what he could do, by encouragement to others to encompass her death, and by character assassination, that he did most joyfully.

It is to be doubted that Lady Margaret ever knew the source of her troubles, or if she did know, she appeared not to care overmuch. Her pride would not have allowed her to complain and it was this pride that caused her to have a new banner executed, containing the light by which she lived: 'Deseo sienpre onera' it trumpeted to all men; that is to say, I am always desiring honour. And since, in her day and among her caste, honour was equated with valour, she was not starved of opportunities by which honour accrued to her name.

Yet most ladies in her day, having survived one husband, would have speedily sought another, purely on grounds of protection, but this was not Margaret de Boxhull's way. She chose, rather, to preside over a military establishment, finding in it the perfect outlet for her temperament. Yet of course she had many offers of marriage - notably from Hoo, Lewknor, Waleys and others. She was usually most courteous in her refusals but were uniformly astonished to learn that she preferred freedom. And when a Lewknor, bewildered by this untypical response, faltered: "But, my lady, I offer you protection" she was so unfeeling as to laugh in his face.

Yet naturally her lifestyle brought inconveniences that most ladies would have fled from, screaming. If you played the man, you had to accept the dangers that a man encountered. When a challenge was offered, there was no side-stepping it. You had to meet it, head on. And it bored her consumedly and she privately cursed the follies of mankind; yet there was nothing she could do. And there was John Knelle, she thought humorously. He knew one day his mistress would drop, and he dreaded it. The loss of his place, his £12 per annum all found, and the glories of his mistress's body thrown in for good measure, was something he could not contemplate with equanimity. But then, he had not had Lady Margaret's privilege of precognition. Ursula had not crossed over to reveal the future to him. He would just have to suffer, she thought.

But her moment of truth almost came on 12th April, 1388. It was a brisk spring morning, sunny but cool. She had been intending to ride to Boxhull to settle an altercation between two peasants when a young man appeared on the horizon, equipped as for war. He advised her, formally but with the utmost courtesy, that he intended to slay her, for the honour of his lady and the cleansing of Sussex. None of this was new, but what intrigued her was that the down was scarcely off his cheek. Now, Lady Margaret, though she could be hard as iron when necessary, really had a kind heart. He was but a boy, and she had no wish to take his life. Yet it would have been relatively simple, with her experience and skill. So she decided, possibly foolishly, to use her sword on him to make it more equal.

Kate Cralle sat, chin in hand, watching her prepare. Margaret smiled: "Wish you were going in my place, as I judge".

"Ay! But nobody challenges Kate Cralle".

They laughed together, and Knelle thought, God help anyone who did, for now Cralle was, by common consent, the purest poison, with a blood-lust that belied her lovely face and mild blue eyes.

So Lady Margaret rode out, minus axe and flail, with just her sword and dagger, to face a man who, despite his extreme youth, knew precisely what he was about. It soon became evident to her that whoever had trained him in warlike exercises, had done a mighty fine job. Faced with this fact, she revised her intentions and went for the camail instinctively. It was his only vulnerable spot, for his armour was good. They went at it like blacksmiths for several minutes, and then, her experience telling, she wounded him in the neck. It must be quite deep, she thought with grim satisfaction, for blood glistened on the mail and ran down the breastplate in two thick streams. Yet it did not finish him for he was young and vigorous.

From Knelle's position at the rear he could not see to clearly what happened. The sun was in his eyes, reflecting off their steel plate. He did see the fellow belabour Lady Margaret's hip plates. After two heavy blows he saw her stiffen, head inclined backward, her sword arm upraised but rigid. The boy cried out in triumph and drove his sword at her side. It was then she cried out and fell from the saddle. Very well, Knelle thought, her luck has run out at last; he cast around in his mind for a likely place to next sell his sword. He was first and foremost a professional soldier.

She writhed, hands clenching and unclenching, but uttering no sound. The man dismounted to finish her, as was his right. But her proverbial luck held. He had raised his sword in both hands to bring it crashing down on her bascinet, when, to Knelle's astonishment, he sank to his knees and pitched sideways. His loss of blood had at last taken its toll, and he had swooned quite away. Like a wench, Knelle thought uncharitably. But it was lucky he had, or Lady Margaret would be dead and he lacking a place. The dead need not squires.

He summoned a hurdle from the castle and had her placed on it, while the young sprig was tended to by his own man. It was then that Knelle saw what had happened. The strap holding the hip plates together had been severed, the top plate had dropped, exposing a good three inches of mail. The purest mischance against which no one could provide. As she was carried in, blood dripped from the wound quite freely, and Knelle wondered casually whether the fellow's sword had penetrated the body cavity. If so, she was probably done for. But again she was lucky. The mail had broken the force of the blow, fierce though it had been, and the steel had gone in a bare three inches.

Believing her dying, he took her to the small room by the chapel where he stripped her; but when he saw how trivial the wound really was, he carried her naked and unconscious body to her bed-chamber, and handed her over to her women, including a distraught Kate Cralle. It was a rough and ready time and he was no stranger to her body. The women cleaned the wound with wine and oil and bound her up. Back in the chapel room he inspected her harness. The strap would have to be replaced, and the links of the mail mended. He was mopping up the blood when he started to chuckle. The armourer could take his time. She wouldn't be wearing it for quite some time.

Thomas Wenham, Kate's squire, joined him, inspecting the armour with interest. He had always admired its Italianate strength. "One thing, John" he grinned suddenly, "Won't be needing your stud for some time. Looks like a bonus for Mistress Kate". Knelle looked at him darkly.

Of course, Elizabeth had to be told, and when advised she dropped everything and came at once, at a stretching gallop. The floods were still out in the valley, for it had been the wettest spring within memory; no ancient man recalled a worse. This meant she had to come over the hill, through the forest. The place was like a quagmire, water filling the deep ruts, and Knelle dropped back to avoid the mud being thrown up by her horse. They slid more than rode down the hill into the valley but nothing seemed to lessen Elizabeth's progress. By the time she rode in, mud splattered, her sister was whitely conscious and quite cheerful.

Elizabeth eyed the blood oozing through the bandages with concern. Still in harness, with visor up, she sat by the bed, taking Meg's strong hand to her own.

"Dearest Meg.....Knelle told me how close it was".

"Tish! John fusses. Like a mother hen. 'Tis no great matter. I recall you had an arrow in your carcase. Very well, have had a sword in mine. Living as we do, wounds are to be expected".

"'Twill be well?".

"Ay".

"How feel you?".

Meg stared up at her sister, amused, withdrawing her hand. "It hurts, fool! Now go and shed your armour. Shall not die afore you return".

When Elizabeth returned, gowned in black, she sat on the bed and gazed straight at the sister she loved. "Who was he, this paladin, who barely failed to put you in your tomb".

"Now, you must not try to make me laugh, Bess. 'Twas not that close. Somewhat deep, I grant, but not mortal. As to the fellow, said he was Thomas Fowle, from over the border in Kent. I knew not his arms. But he was a gentleman, well armed and well trained".

"And yet John tells me he was all set to finish you".

"Knelle talks too much. Like an old woman. But Fowle had the right to finish me, you know that well. But it did not happen, Bess. I hurt him early on, in the neck. He bled profusely, to his great weakness. So he swooned and was carried off by his squire, so Knelle says, over his horse".

"Hmm! If ever I come across him, mayhap I will try conclusions with him.....just to teach him a lesson".

"Indeed you will do no such thing, Bess. He said he had come to slay me. If I failed with him, 'twas my own fault. Should have taken my axe to him, that is all. But he was youngish and I wished to do the chivalric thing".

"Your tenderness of heart will be the death of you, Meg" Bess stated sternly. "And nearly was. Mend it".

"Ay, but now, hush. I hear Kate. She brings victuals. So enough of this. She was greatly distressed. You know how she does love me".

That was perfectly obvious. It was equally obvious that the love was returned. She had charms, had Cralle, and not only beneath her gown. Her blue eyes were wide and soft, beneath long lashes; and her mouth was lusciously mobile. Bess could not help thinking what a whore she would have made, had she not been as she was and quite understood her sister's enslavement. She coughed discreetly. "Meg tells me of your skill with arms, Kate".

"If so, I owe it to Meg". She sighed: "But Bess, I do so yearn for some action. Of what use are these skills if you use them not? I am greatly excited when I see Meg fight. It must be fun".

"Was not 1381 enough for you?".

"Nay, by the Saints! They were but peasants. You know well enough what I mean".

They knew only too well. "Be patient. Your day will come, I doubt not. In this lawless England of ours, it will come. Be not too hungry for honour". Elizabeth set down her wine. "Come, let me test your strength, even as men do".

Kate grasped the hand offered. Bess's eyes opened wide. She could not force Cralle's arm down. At the end of three minutes both were flushed and breathing hard. "By the Mass!" Elizabeth gasped, "I recognise you as my equal in strength".

Meg smiled proudly from the bed. "Ay, she is strong, as you will find if ever you cross swords with her. 'Tis no mean achievement to lay my squire on his back with a sword. Yet she has done it. I was there. And Knelle was dazed".

Bess was all admiration. "I would try you sometime, Kate".

Her cheeks dimpling, Cralle murmured: "At your service, Elizabeth".

Now, John Knelle had envisaged Lady Margaret not needing her harness for some time. In this he was right. Her wound healed well but the physician was stern with her, not allowing her out of bed for three months. She was not pleased. During her enforced inactivity, Cralle gleefully undertook all estate duties in the saddle, leaving Meg in a parchment littered bed.

Knelle did not like Cralle, nor did the men. As far as Knelle was concerned, she was a competitor for Lady Margaret's favour, and definitely had the edge over him; all of which was not calculated to endear her to him. And the men disliked her for purely male reasons - that is to say, they knew her to be perverted, that she held them in contempt, being sapphic to her backbone. More importantly, they found it difficult to come to terms with her skill in besting them in practice.

It so happened that during Lady Margaret's immobility, complaint was made of an infestation of outlaws in Darvel Forest, virtually on Glottingham's back door, and it was decided that action had to be taken, and that it could not wait. Kate gurgled delightedly, and called her squire, Thomas Wenham, to arm her. Hands behind her dark head, Margaret watched and she was gradually encased in the splendid Flemish harness, imported from Antwerp. She had never seen Kate happier and as she heard her ride out at the head of the men, she smiled.

Cralle led them through the dark woodland caverns in a sweep that was both efficient and brutal. Those miscreants who failed to die, she hung without a tremor. "Friend Knelle" she remarked, in her sneering way, "see me an end to these carrion. String them up". And strung up they were. Nobody thought anything of that. The war against lawlessness was perpetual and every landowner waged it; the game laws were barbaric and savagely enforced. As a man-at-arms growled, when she was out of earshot: "Give the bitch her due, she be good". Nobody denied it, yet she was not liked. Their loyalty was to Lady Margaret, not her understrapper.

Needless to say, Margaret was mighty pleased with her creation, for such Kate was as she would readily admit. From being a prodigious craven, she had metamorphosed into a highly capable lady, fearing nothing. Experience of life had convinced Meg that there was no such thing as a coward, simply an untrained mind. The method adopted by her father - that is, the carrot and the stick - had never been known to fail. True, Ursula had had a natural cruelty which had only needed channeling, by discipline, into something more worthy; Kate had been somewhat different. Cralle had had an overwhelming sense of female inadequacy coupled with a fear of being hurt. It had been relatively simple to talk the first out of her and train the second out of existence by making her see that, amply protected, she was more than capable of hurting men, who she had previously feared for their strength, while at the same time despising them as being inferior. Once Kate had grasped this salient fact, truculence and arrogance shone forth like a beacon, and there was no danger into which she would not blithely ride with her mentor. Courage is, as Meg never tired of announcing, purely an attitude of mind; and were ladies not raised in such a restricted way, their subservience would not be so manifest. Ay, Meg was proud of Cralle. "Why, Kate" she was wont to say, "you've blossomed". At which Cralle, smiling demurely, would return: "'Twas about time, I fancy".

It was not long before the wounded lady was allowed out of bed. Her hurt had mended perfectly, but her legs were weak through laying so long abed. But this passed, and she was soon on horseback and practising her skills, to recover her lost edge, and to put power back into her shoulder muscles. For as she rightly remarked to Knelle, after one hectic session: "One knows not the day or the hour when I shall have to deal with some fighting fool!".

Knelle wiped the sweat from his eyes and grunted: "Your ladyship has an awesome reputation. There will always be someone anxious to advance his own by taking your life".

He was being unduly pessimistic. From now on she lived in comparative peace. Many men had allowed themselves to be persuaded, by the Brabans of the world, that Margaret de Boxhull was a witch having made a compact with the Devil for invincibility in the field in return for her soul. Clearly, men said, she was a sorceress and meet to be destroyed. They were much relieved to know that a man had at last thrust his sword into her, for it meant that she was a freak, not diabolic. It was, in fact, only her high place that had prevented her being denounced as a witch; dog does not eat dog.

Elizabeth made her weekly visits to Glottingham and on one of these she did eventually try out Kate Cralle and found the experience one not to be repeated for Cralle laid her on her back, quite unconscious. Men-at-arms carried Elizabeth in, and laying her on Lady Margaret's bed, departed grinning.

Kate was greatly worried. Margaret, in high good humour, told her not to be silly, it was the chance you took, and had not she, Margaret, put her away in the early days of training? Getting water she doused her sister's face with it. Soon there was a faint sigh and Bess returned from darkness, feebly moving arms and legs.

"Not unlike a stricken butterfly, sweeting" Meg whispered, kissing Cralle hungrily. "I stand proud of you".

"But.....but....." Kate protested, putting her by, "should we not tend to Bess. See how she does struggle".

"Pooh! She is well enough. Is she not a soldier, like we?". Then, with a laugh: "And she thought it would be so easy, putting you on your back. A lesson in over-confidence, is't not so, Bess?".

"Ay" came the faint response, "Kate is better than I thought possible". Still she struggled to move, but was much stricken.

Between them they divested her of her mail, while the lady croaked: "By the Mass! But how weak I feel. Catherine de Cralle, you are a bonny fighter. Only the second person to put me down. Meg did it at Echyngham when we were yet maids. But no-one since; nay, not even my own man, Simon of Funtridge. Come to my arms and kiss me. You are as good as any man, nay, better. And given me a headache into the bargain. Will long remember our meeting".

"I warrant you will" Meg nodded, "and now ladies, we will take wine together, in true comradeship, as companions in arms should. Together I swear we could take Paris!".

They all laughed, but Bess somewhat carefully. Yet, such was her toughness, that in the evening, as the shadows lengthened, and they watched her ride away, the red sun glinting on her equipage, she had recovered completely, riding erect and proud.

In bed that night, Dick Shoyswell muttered to her: "That Cralle woman, she be something extraordinary. Your ladyship was always queen with the sword as I know well. Yet she laid you low".

"Why, Dick" the lady murmured, in the voice she kept for the bed-chamber, that is to say, low and seductive, "Elizabeth de Echyngham can be laid low by weapons other than steel. Come, invest me!". And she gave herself up to impalement with abandon; and as she cried out in her ecstasy, Shoyswell reflected that no man could have dragged that wail from her with any sword. Not even the Cralle bitch.

THE NUN

Now, Lady Margaret had few friends upon whom she could rely, outside her family and entourage. This hostile situation troubled her very little, for she had made herself self-sufficient to a large degree. But she had one unrelenting enemy - Sir John Pelham. She never went out of her way to fuel this enmity but it existed and she was aware of it. It was all very inconvenient but hardly more than that. She would have much preferred to be on good terms with neighbouring magnates but since it could not be, she merely shrugged.

With all men's hands potentially against her, she had one female friend, to wit, Lady Eleanor Hoo, who, when her husband was out of the country (and this was mighty often) resided at the manor of Dallington. Lady Hoo, since the birth of her son, Thomas, had been ailing, and at Dallington she could nourish herself in the warm southern sunshine and see as far as the promontory of Beauchef (*). When she took up residence at Dallington she never failed to write to her bellicose neighbour and Lady Margaret often visited her.

The friendship between these two was a strange one. Eleanor Hoo knew the life Margaret lived and constantly feared for her; yet she found it mighty attractive, and admired the tall, muscular Margaret de Boxhull, not without wistfulness. In her youth she too had been rebellious of spirit but had allowed herself, in common with the majority of ladies of her class, to be crushed by convention and two marriages for before she had married Hoo, she had been married to Sir Robert d'Ufford of Wrentham, co. Suffolk. She was the well-dowered younger daughter and coheir of Sir Thomas de Felton, Knight of the Garter, of Litcham, Norfolk, where she was born; and on one much treasured occasion, her father being from home and her brother too young, she had donned armour and led their men out to do battle with a predator. She was therefore predisposed in favour of Lady Boxhull. It was she who had been a buckler to Lady Margaret, arguing Pelham out of his long-held desire to destroy "Black Meg" as he called her.

In visiting Lady Hoo, Margaret knew the dangers she was courting for Pelham's land abutted on Lady Hoo's and this was too close for real comfort. Nonetheless, being the lady she was she went, little guessing that she was starting out on an adventure that would result in a bloody confrontation, open war between the two houses. She had occasionally wondered whether Pelham was the man destined to do her to death, but again she shrugged, going about her business fully armed and leaving the future to destiny.

She guessed that within an hour of her leaving her own domains Pelham would know; and she was right. It was certain he had spies, as she had, but she snapped her fingers at danger. More, she knew that he would never attack her while under Lady Hoo's roof beam, for that lady would support her with her own men had this happened. Meg knew it, and Pelham knew it, so he bided his time. The Hoo family also owned Wartling, to the south, nigh unto Pevensey, and Margaret thanked all the saints that the sea that lapped Pevensey Castle and reached the escarpment upon which Wartling stood, made it mighty unsuitable for Lady Hoo's rheumatism. Dallington was dangerous enough; Wartling would have been doubly so.

So, when she and Kate rode out that day, they rode in high chivalry, with their arms blazoned on their jupons, and their banners fluttering in the summer breeze, it was little short of provocative self-advertisement, an act of defiance in the face of any Pelham man who might see. The men-at-arms had all had their breastplates and kettle hats new scoured, all this to honour Lady Eleanor, but also for Lady Margaret's protection.

(*) Beachy Head.

Catherine de Cralle, who rode beside her mistress and friend, was still young enough to hope for trouble, some Pelham pate to split; Margaret was mature enough not to want it. For Kate, military prowess was new and exciting; for Margaret it was an old story, boring by repetition. She knew what Kate was thinking, knew it instinctively as only a lady in love can. She saw Kate riding erect, proud and watchful; she watched the steel hand straying absently to her dagger and was greatly amused. Kate had the guts to back up her aspirations but she could not help sending her mind back over the intervening years to the early hours of the revolt when Kate's teeth had chattered with fear. Now she was always spoiling for a fight and it irked her greatly that since 1381 she had never been able to tangle with someone who mattered, only with outlaws and peasants. Meg's law was so firm that the peasants were cowed, and no gentleman sought out Cralle. Besides, since Meg's wound Kate had not even had the pleasure of excitement by proxy. It was all very provoking and within her helmet she pouted with frustration.

The visit to Lady Hoo passed off without incident. Not a leaf stirred - well, hardly, and that was only in the summer breeze - but on the way home to Glottingham something very odd happened, which your chronicler will now relate. They espied, having reached the Battle road, a lone nun coming up the steep hill below the vill of Dallington. It was a circumstance so remarkable as to make the two ladies stop and sit there, hands on the saddle pommel, staring at the quite incredible sight. Usually, when they had to move from place to place, the religious attached themselves to parties of travellers, so perilous were the roads; for although it would be a depraved outlaw who attacked a Bride of Christ, it was not that infrequent.

Astonished, Kate remarked: "Think you someone is tired of life?".

"Ay, she must indeed be crazed, sweetheart".

As the figure laboriously climbed the hill, her palfrey sliding on the hard-baked earth, they could see it was not just a sister, but someone of some authority in the Benedictine Order, as witnessed by her badge of office. The two ladies made perfunctory obeisance.

Meg began: "Reverend Mother, I marvel to see you travelling in such wise".

"Ah but" returned the other, pleasantly enough, "I rode with other travellers as far as Heathfield. But there they turned north towards Kent, and since my business is at Battle, and will not admit of delay, I decided to essay the journey alone".

"'Twas foolish, and you are fortunate indeed to be alive. This road has a bad reputation. 'Tis lonely and.....".

The lady laughed lightly, which amazed them. And now she came to think of it, Meg thought, the nun had the most fearless grey eyes, certainly unlike the average female religious. As for Kate she developed a sudden, illogical dislike for the nun, and she could not understand why. "Your ladyship - for such I doubt not you are by your arms - it would be a scurvy knave who laid profane hands on even the most unworthy of Christ's servants".

"You are sadly misinformed" Meg reproved her coolly. "But yet, the afternoon grows on apace, and having come so far, 'twould be a sin for you to miscarry. I therefore offer you a night's lodging at my castle of Glottingham".

"You are the Lady Margaret Boxhull?". The question was entirely superfluous, for anyone of breeding, and certainly any gentlewoman, could read a person's quality and name from a coat of arms, heraldry being an indispensable part of education. Cold fingers drummed on Kate's vertebrae as the nun added: "Have heard of you".

"Even so" Meg nodded, in quiet pride. "And this is Mistress Catherine de Cralle". The nun inclined her head courteously to the black mascles on Kate's jupon, and smiled: "Honourable arms, honourably worn".

"And you?".

"Joanna de Kingsfold, Sub-Prioress of Rusper Nunnery".

"Ah!". Margaret peered through the vents of her helmet, amused. "Surely I have heard of one of that name being Prioress of Rusper?".

"'Tis mine aunt, lady".

"Well, Mother, since we stand talking in a most perilous situation, with Dallington Forest in front of us, Ashburnham Forest behind us and Darvel Forest to come, it behoves us to remove ourselves with some despatch".

"Not to mention" Kate supplemented, "that the shadows do lengthen".

So came the nun to Glottingham and in the doing provided the chatelaine with a delicious, not to say hilarious night, enlivened by Kate's all-consuming jealousy and the nun's attractions, as we will now relate.

Margaret knew certain things about Rusper. First, Ursula had been educated there, and had told many tales of wild goings-on. Ursula had been gay, wild and arrogant, self-indulgent and many other things; yet she had been brave as well and had thus burrowed herself into Meg's heart. Secondly, Meg knew what all people knew, that Rusper Nunnery was little more than a reformatory for wayward, high-born young ladies, and unwanted daughters from families over-burdened with female offspring. Ursula had reported romps and quarrels that had taken place. Thus, taking de Kingsfold's eyes into the balance, it was easy to guess that Rusper had changed little and that Margaret was sure she would never forget this visitor.

Below in the guardroom, ribald comments flew like arrows and all men suspected their mistress would neither want to be disturbed or reported to that night. And in the morning she would be happy, if debilitated. It was not their concern, they having their own fish to fry.

Two floors up, the three ladies ate together, at first quite happily, but soon barbed words were flying between Kate and the nun, redolent with antipathy which they hardly troubled to disguise. Cralle recognised one of her own kind, and when the Benedictine, ignoring her, smiled at Margaret and sighed: "I pray you to call me Joanna", she started to fume. Margaret, naturally enough, liked to be the subject of contention and wondered, briefly, what it would be like to have both of them around all the time. Then, with a regretful sigh, she told Kate she would dispense with her services that night. Cralle stood up, hurt and jealous, tears forming in the corner of her blue eyes. Margaret nearly weakened but the nun so intrigued her than she persisted; and Kate, much distressed, flaunted out, slamming the door behind her, for Margaret was mistress.

The nun laughed, softly. "A jealous lady".

Margaret drained her wine. "Will make it up to her". She had a conscience about what she had done, but the appetite grows by what it feeds on, and her appetite for the nun was prodigious.

Joanna, in a most un-religious, seductive voice, suggested bed and Meg, nothing loth, took her hand. They could hardly take their eyes from each other. Joanna forced herself to be calm and precise in her movements, belying her inner heat. First she removed her crucifix, which she raised to her lips, before setting it aside. Then her chain of office was likewise set aside. As she started to remove her habit, Meg stopped in her own disrobing to stare in disbelief; for beneath her hooded Benedictine habit, Joanna wore a finely wrought suit of black mail. Meg leant against the wall and laughed until the tears ran.

"Tis new fashion in the nunnery?".

"My aunt would not give me leave to ride unless I wore it. I fear that before we are religious, we are gentlewomen".

"Say you so? No wonder you feared not the forest way". Not only was it the mail, but she wore at her waist a mighty serviceable dagger.

Joanna sighed. "I am no ornament to mine Order, I fear me. As well as being venal, I am also the most prodigious liar. I have no business at Battle. 'Twas you I sought". Meg stared at the nun's pink face. "Ay, the stories I heard of you excited me. When I was but a maid, a novice, Ursula de Ukkefeld spoke of you when she visited our house. I envied her, laying with you. Then I had fantasies, as ladies will. I wanted to lay with you also; 'twas a dream I had. I tried to escape in spiritual exercises and my duties. Yet, though my words flew up, my thoughts remained below. It helped not at all. After I heard of your proceedings in the revolt, I grew even hotter. My aunt, seeing how it 'twas with me, in desperation sent me to one of our houses in the county of Cambridge, but it was of no avail. I pleaded with mine aunt to let me return, which she did, for in truth she needed me, age having placed its hand on her. But I knew no peace and in the end she bade me ride in God's name. For I heard that Mistress Ursula had fallen in battle and I knew not of Mistress de Cralle".

Meg smiled, opening her arms to her. "I count myself honoured, Joanna" she muttered, thickly, gazing at her body, at the firm full breasts and her palpitating sex. Then they were together, naked and entwined, on the bed. Their love was most excellent. For Meg, formidable as she was in combat, was no match for the nun. She was frantic, jerking uncontrollably, moaning, for the cool, small white hands and probing tongue drove her to the edge of madness.

Later she asked her if all the nuns were of this persuasion; and Joanna nodded with some vigour. "There are but eight religious, and then the young ladies. We are a happy house!" she added, with a giggle. Margaret could imagine it, remembering Ursula's words. It was natural enough, she imagined, with ladies spending their lives together. The reverse was true in monasteries, as she well knew, although the subject was forbidden in polite conversation.

"I trust you will confess this to the priest!".

"Worry not, my confessor is a reasonable man!".

It was all very amusing, and the first hour sped very sweetly. They lay on their bellies, faces close together, alternately laughing and sighing in pleasure, when the door burst open, and

Kate Cralle stood there like an avenging angel, naked as always at this hour, but hair coiled on her head, and arming cap tied tightly under the chin. Her face was angry and implacable and in her left hand carried a bascinet with aventail and in her right two swords.

Meg looked over her shoulder, staggered by the sight. "What the Devil.....!".

Cralle tossed one sword on the bed, almost contemptuously and spoke directly to Joanna in a cold, distant voice. "If you wish to displace me from my rightful place, you will have to slay me!".

It was obvious that Cralle was beside herself with jealousy and Meg was secretly pleased. Yet she had to crush a desire to laugh. Moreover, she had never been fought over before and the prospect attracted.

Joanna seemed not a whit surprised or abashed. Possibly, Meg was later to reflect, she had had such demonstrations of bile visited upon her before. She turned over, propping herself up on her elbows, smiling maddeningly all the while. "Slay you, Mistress? It can be arranged" she suggested, truculently. You could almost see her thinking, this bitch needs chastisement. "But I have no bascinet or arming cap".

Meg uncoiled herself and went into her armoury and came back with the necessary articles. Joanna took them, and prepared herself, seemingly eager, not taking her eyes from Cralle's hostile face. "You must not think, Mistress, that because I am a professed religious, I have forgotten that I am a lady of coat armour".

"You are a disgrace to your Order!".

Conscience pricked Joanna and at last she became angry.

"That may well be, but 'tis not for you to say it".

Margaret watched the two ladies from the bed, entranced. They were truly something to see, advancing on each other in their helmets, with nipples hard as iron; it was all mighty incongruous Meg thought, yet quite splendid.

Cralle attacked first, her first blow stopping Joanna in her tracks, for Kate's arm was very powerful; and the second beating her to her knees. Meg was sorry it was over so soon but you could expect little more from a nun. Then Joanna levered herself up, using the sword and went for Kate with great savagery, driving her back until she slammed against the wall. Her left hand gripped Kate's right at the wrist, and slammed it against the stonework until perforce Cralle released the sword. Then, breathing hard, she placed the point of her sword against the mail links protecting the throat.

"Now, Mistress" Meg heard her say, "I have proved myself the better lady. Now, on your knees, and beg my forgiveness".

Kate croaked defiantly: "Never!".

"Then die, bitch!". Joanna slammed the sword into the mail and Kate sank to her knees. Meg came off the bed in a galvanic bound. Things had gone much too far. She had no intention of losing Kate, however much fun Joanna was. Cralle was choking at the pressure of steel against her throat when Joanna felt herself being dragged back.

Kate sank to her knees and Meg lifted the bascinet from her head. There was a tiny spot of blood on the white throat. Had not the steel been of such quality, Catherine de Cralle would even now be dying at her feet.

"You jealous fool!". Kate felt herself being dragged across the floor and thrown roughly onto the bed. She burst into tears, hot, burning tears of jealousy. Entwining her arms around her friend's legs, she buried her head in the belly that she had come to regard as her own possession.

"'Tis but that I love you, Meg, and would die for you, at your feet, like a dog. The thought of another....." - she choked - "fair drove me from my wits. I beseech you to forgive me".

Meg gazed down at her tenderly, and caressed the long fair hair that, released from the arming cap, tumbled wildly around her ivory shoulders. "O, foolish Kate!" she murmured, lovingly, "know you not that Joanna is here but for a short while, and I you have always. But come, I honour you as a brave lady in truth, and my very precious, sweet Kate; and I do glory in your devotion to this, mine body. Now, let us lie together in amity, three loving friends. And let it be that you both show me of your skill in love. How say you, Joanna?".

During this exchange, the nun had removed her helmet and laid it with her sword on the settle, smiling smugly all the while. She had bested Cralle and could afford to be generous. And it would endear her to Lady Margaret. So she lay down on Meg's right side, while Kate lay on the left.

"How long may you stay with us, Joanna?".

"Why, my lady aunt, that is to say, the Prioress, gave me six days absence, no more, and I did spend one day travelling and yet half a day again".

Margaret was delighted. "Then may you stay for three days more, 'tis certain, then will Kate and I escort you home to Rusper. We may do it in one day, for sure, for as I think, 'tis but near the town of Horsham".

"'Tis so indeed".

"Then 'tis settled. And on the morrow will we ride to Echyngham. I would have you know my sister, the Lady Elizabeth".

Joanna's eyes widened. "The famous Elizabeth de Echyngham? She who was sore wounded in the revolt? And is of such great and undoubted fame?".

Meg laughed in pure pride. "Even she. Now let us to our rest, my dear, my very dear friends. But stay, give me your hands, my loves". And taking from each their right hand, she joined them together. "Never more must these dear hands be clenched in enmity around the hilt of knightly sword. Rather must they be clasped in loyalty and friendship. Ladies should not fight one another, for we are surrounded by the hatred of men, whose aim is to reduce us in dignity, subjugate us to their gross desires and trample our spirits in the mud. So swear we undying fidelity to each other until the end". And greatly moved by her words, they swore it would be so.

Then, around dawn, with Kate departed for the privy, Joanna clung to Meg with passion. Whereat Meg stroked her dark hair, then held her head firmly but gently.

"Joanna.....dearest Joanna, could you not be dispensed from your vows and take your rightful place with me here?".

Without even asking, she guessed what the situation was, immediately the party rode beneath the gateway, and had to suppress a bubble of merriment that formed deep down and struggled hard to claw its way upwards. She stared at the nun, and the quite wicked, luminous eyes. And then she turned her eyes to the crestfallen Kate Cralle, and again trod hard on a desire to laugh.

Meg trumpeted the name of the nun as might a Herald a great warrior at a tournament, for she gloried in rank and position. Elizabeth, although not of her sister's persuasion, could quite see the great attraction of Joanna. They all took wine together and the visit passed very happily; but the time for departure came all too soon.

They rode forth, scattering chickens from their path, as also geese who fled cackling protestingly. On emerging from the gateway, and crossing the moat, they acknowledged the bow of Adam de Foxearle, the long-living parson. Rector since 1362, his brush with Elizabeth at the time of the revolt had long since been forgiven and forgotten. They were now on excellent terms, which was just as well as the church stood within the curtilage of the manor house. His hair was now grey, yet he remained quite unaffected by rheumatism despite the low-lying nature of Echyngham, the yearly floods and the fogs that hung round the manor house in winter like a newly married wife around her husband's neck, hardly to be shook off. Between them they had a good working relationship. He presumed not to interfere on secular affairs, and she had no interest in religious ones, except where her own religious health, and that of her household were concerned. Like a good Catholic, Elizabeth attended to her religious duties conscientiously, and saw her household did too; in return, Master Adam turned a blind eye to her wellknown peccadilloes. She was entitled to her pleasures.

Often he would privately drain his cup to her, for he admired her greatly. Yet was he ashamed of his feelings, most unseemly in a cleric. Yet when he saw her ride out on some perilous undertaking, his member swelled. But it never came to aught for she left him in no doubt what she thought of priests who had base thoughts about women in general and high born ladies in particular. For while a priest held the rank of a knight, she was the daughter of a Baron by writ and counted herself far above him. So Master Adam kept his dreams in his fevered brain, and went about his business.

On the way back Joanna sighed: "So little time remaining. Were I but one of the laity".

The following morning, Kate woke refreshed, and turning, enquired where Joanna might be. On being told, in the chapel praying, Cralle laughed heartily. "A strange mixture, that!".

"Ay, but a wonderful".

"I hear you say so".

"And I would have you friends".

"You ask much".

"'Tis my wish".

"Then it will be so".

"'Tis well. Now, it is in my mind, Kate, that we will not budge this day. I wish you and she to get properly acquainted. Then on the morrow we will escort her to Rusper".

"Which will take us through Pelham land".

Meg raised a mocking eyebrow. "So go we armed to the teeth".

Kate gurgled. "As usual. 'Twould be nice to have a little blood-letting. Push our swords through some Pelham men".

An admonitory finger wagged playfully under her nose. "You are a blood-thirsty lady! I desire no open confrontation with Pelham".

Kate thought she was mad. It would have to come sooner or later. Was Meg growing old? They would pass close to Warbleton, where Pelham held sway. Some Pelham retainer would almost certainly see them. And what did it matter? The Echynghams were of the older Sussex nobility, and the Pelhams were newcomers, parvenus, not long entered the county from London and Hertfordshire, and Meg, she knew held them in haughty disregard. Had she been able to see the future and know that part of her family's lands would end up in Pelham hands, she would have gnashed her teeth in rage. Even as it was, she could scarcely see the Pelham arms without reaching for her sword. Nor was this merely an antipathetic instinct but necessity.

Cralle knew as well as her mentor that whenever Pelham men met Boxhull men, there was bloodshed. There was a long account to settle, according to Pelham, starting with the massacre of Pelham men at Hoods Corner. Margaret encouraged her men and Pelham did the same with his men. Nor did it end there. The enmity spread into families with whom both families had alliance or friendship. Therefore, Bess was brought in and so was Cralle. Kate's own men, too, had become involved, for Kate was a Boxhull partisan, body and soul. The three black mascles (or three lozenges) of Cralle always rode with the lion rampant of Boxhull, and Meg was grateful for it, for since she had released Kate's native aggressiveness, she was a fighting lady of great worth on whom she could rely. Kate asked nothing more than to die at Meg's side and her mentor knew it quite well but desired to put off the evil day as long as she could. When it came, the conflict would be brutal and savage; ideally it would be something best avoided but in her heart Meg knew it had to come, for only in that way could the boil of hatred be lanced.

"You think mayhap we shall have trouble on the morrow, Meg?"

"On the outward journey Joanna's habit will protect us, but on the homeward journey will be mighty surprised if he does not try to pay me back for the Hoods Corner affair. He has long wished to slay me. And you too, if it comes to that, as you ride with me. So take your mace and axe".

"Think you I would not?"

"And wear your gorget and not simply the aventail. Would not have your pretty neck severed by an axe".

"Nor I, if the truth be told" Cralle admitted gravely. "'Twould greatly spoil our love". Meg laughed and hugged her. "So shall it be as you say".

All that day Joanna and Kate grew acquainted, friends at last, while Meg looked benignly on. From time to time she had to leave them, for the work of the castle had to go on; yet seeing how loosely gowned she was, the men grinned. There was John Knelle to see, then her steward, Master Henry Willard, and the hundred and one other things that formed part of daily routine. A captain of a castle had not the ordering of her day. Yet was she able to spend some time with her friends. Had it not been so, it would have been tragic. It was a happy day, one of the best she had known.

Yet the morrow came, and that too soon. Margaret had given orders for thirty men. Then she bethought her, and smiling, she did change her mind, as men say ladies are prone to do. "Nay, John, make it forty. And yet, arrange it so that the other ten ride an hour after us, under a good man".

Knelle was on his knees, buckling on her greaves, and he stared up at her, startled. "What is this, your ladyship?"

"Slow witted as ever, John? Think on't a while".

He thought, hands on knees, and a slow smile spread over his face. "Your ladyship is the clever one! I think I see. 'Tis Pelham. A trap. And 'tis masterly".

Her cheeks dimpled with pleasure. "Why, I thought it had some merit also. My mind is this. I have long known that Pelham is desirous of paying me back for the affair at Hoods Corner, long since, though I was within my rights. I know of a surety that he seeks to slay me; I make no complaints. A gentleman has a right to make war against another who has offended him. I know his hatred from Lady Cralle, Lady Hoo and others. Thus, I doubt me that we shall win home without a fight. Pelham has as many retainers at Warbleton as you have hairs on your chin, they tell me; it is likely that one will see our party as we ride, and so report. On our return we may well look for an ambush. He will think to outnumber us. Thus, those extra ten fellows will surprise him. When they ride from here instruct them to wear houppelandes to disguise their livery".

"Why does your ladyship not leave this matter to me? 'Twould be safer". It was the wrong thing to say.

Lady Margaret raked him with frosty eyes. "I run from no man, John Knelle. Have you served me so long and know not that? My life has been threatened so often that I lose no sleep over it".

"Yet 'twill be war, bitter and bloody, lady. I too have heard of his fulminations against Black Meg".

"Then will it be war, John. And why not? Kate is right. We had to meet one day, he and I. There is that between us that can only be wiped out in blood. Kate knows it, I know it and you know it, right well. So no more".

"Yet would I take mace and axe. And wear the gorget. Pelham is a good soldier, though no longer young. You'll mind Poitiers, where King John of France was made prisoner".

"Ay, that was a good piece of business" she replied offhandedly. "As to my arming, when I ride into acute peril, have you ever known me not to go equipped as for war?"

"And the nun?"

"What of her?"

"I know the Horsham road as well as your ladyship. Have travelled it often enough. 'Tis unhealthy, all forest. It troubles me that she rides with her head unprotected".

Margaret smiled. "Have suggested a bascinet, John, yet she feels her nun's habit of more protection than a helmet. I know not, she may be in the right of it". Her hand dropped to settle her sword firmly on her hip, and tested it for reach. "Yet if you feel strongly on the matter, I will try to move her. I confess I would grieve if she fell".

"Ay, and I remind your ladyship of Jane Alard. Though you remember the poor wretch, doubtless".

She raised her arms at his command and he nodded, well satisfied. Failing a massive mace blow to the head, she would be safe enough. "You may leave it to me, John. I thank you for reminding me of Alard. 'Tis strange how the memory plays tricks. As you know, I visit Salehurst church every month for Mass, yet my thoughts are all for Mistress de Ukkefeld. Had completely forgotten Alard. Yet well do I remember Braban bringing her over the drawbridge with an arrow in her eye. Poor wench! You are doubtless right. Will speak to Joanna".

Yet Joanna resisted, thinking lightly of the risk. "A fine sight I should be arriving at the nunnery in a bascinet! No man kills a nun". Margaret sighed, thinking how ignorance could kill.

In her own chamber, the more stocky Kate Cralle was likewise being armed by Thomas Wenham. He watched her test her sword, drawing it part out, then slamming it back. Like everyone in his time, he admired fine arms and hers was of the finest.

"'Tis strange, life, is't not, Thomas? Two days since I would have gladly pushed this, mine sword, through Joanna's body. Now I would defend it with my life's blood".

The man grinned. "You liked her not?".

"Not at first. I viewed her as an enemy".

"And now you wish only to push your sword through a Pelham man".

"More than one, Thomas, unless I am myself slain".

"Nay, good my mistress, in that harness you will be very well".

"So I believe" she returned with a slight smile, "yet do accidents happen. But stay. My service pleases you?".

"Ay, greatly, Mistress. 'Tis an honour to serve such as you, lady. I do hope to serve you until the end. You are pleased with me, Mistress?".

She laid her hand on his shoulder. "In good truth, Thomas. I rely on you greatly. I desired you should know this, in case I fell this day. 'Tis a venture of great peril". She lifted her arms. "All is safe?".

"All secure, lady. I swear it".

She went from him, seeking Margaret and Joanna, finding them staring from Margaret's chamber window at the sun-kissed country. They turned, smiling. "Ready for the road, Kate?".

"Ready and eager, Meg. 'Twill be a joyous adventure, indeed".

"Help me to try to convince Joanna to go protected, Kate. 'Tis a dangerous road".

"Ay, truly, sweet Joanna, you should" Kate urged, "we travel the forest ways much and there are many wicked men. Also" - she glanced at Meg - "there are other dangers. We have enemies, most bitter and determined that we shall die. You ride with us, thus you share our danger. You are very dear to us. Were you to mis-carry, I know not what we should do. And we hope to love again, do we not? Were you to drop, 'twould be too frightful. We knew a lady once who raised her visor and died in most horrible fashion. No clean sword thrust, but an arrow in the eye. I beseech you, sweet Joanna, wear a bascinet".

She spoke with such tenderness and urgency, that the nun capitulated at once. "Why, Kate.....".

"Now, come, ladies, we have far to go, many dangerous leagues to travel. We waste time. But first come you to the armoury, Joanna, and I will equip you as befits your rank".

Thus they rode, early in the morning, armed to the teeth, ready for the dangers of the road, and their enemies might provide. They rode fast, through Dallington Forest and on to the high plateau which is now bald and contains many hamlets but which was then thickly wooded and mighty dangerous to travel.

Then, what Lady Margaret had hoped to avoid by an early start, in fact happened. "Damnation!" she muttered. Riding the forest way about five hundred paces distant, that led from Warbleton to the highway they rode, was a lone soldier, wearing Pelham livery. Courteously Margaret raised her hand in greeting. There was no response. Being alone there was naught the man could do, so he reined in and watched them pass.

"So! Within the hour Pelham will know that the lion of Boxhull and the mascles of Cralle ride west, and the extent of their power. Thus, shall we not win home without contention".

Kate laughed softly. "This day should be mighty interesting, Meg. Or I could turn aside and slay the fellow, an' you wish". She even placed her hand on her sword, speculatively.

Aghast, Meg cried: "Nay, nay, 'twould be murder. 'Tis one thing cutting down a man whose hand is against you. Quite another to take a fellow's life wantonly and send a sinner unshriven to his Maker. Nay, face we what we must with a high heart".

It was an impeccable chivalric judgement; Knelle thought, but a foolish. Cralle could have settled the fellow's business easily, and joyed to do it, bloodthirsty bitch that she was. Many men would have to die because of his mistress's high-minded ideas. Usually strong, she was now being weak and womanly. It was meet that the fellow should have died, to save so many others. Had only he, Knelle, been in command, it would have been different.

Their way left the vill of Heathfield to the south. It was but a clearing in the thinning woodland, with a church and a scattering of miserable cots. The road lay straight to the west, along the bosky ridgeway to the vill of Buckstede, after which the road plunged deep into the forest, and thus by Meresfeld and Flesing* towards Horsham. At Flesing there was an abundance of hogs at pannage, and Knelle muttered in his beard, knowing their way to be perilous, as the forest pressed in remorselessly.

For Meg and Kate the time was enlivened greatly by the nun's inconsequential and at times highly frivolous conversation, dealing as it did with love and physical enchantments. Nobody had a greater fund of verbal stimulation than Joanna de Kingesfold, and Meg and Kate felt themselves throbbing, and knew themselves to be wet. The bitch could do it with great facility in French, Latin and even Greek, for she was much educated. Yet in the end they had to call a halt. "Nay, Joanna, no more I pray you. Have pity, sweet witch, our sinews do crack for your body, and knowing us twain to be so encased in steel, 'tis cruel in very truth".

Joanna giggled and spoke no more of love. Yet she spoke of much else, life in her nunnery and the games they played that were far from innocent; laughing at Theodore's penance of three years on women found 'practising vice with a woman', and laughing, even, at the great Augustine who, in 423, reminded a community of nuns that 'the love which they bore to one another ought not to be carnal but spiritual'.

* Fletching.

"'Tis very well for a man" Joanna commented bitterly, "they know not the hungers that inhabit a lady's body. Great was the hunger that drove me from the nunnery to seek you, Meg. And great is the hunger you have for Kate, and she for you. A pox on all men, say I".

"Amen to that!" the ladies agreed feelingly.

"Ay, nor is that all" Joanna went on, with deepening bitterness, yet in a lower voice, for she spoke the purest heresy, "but all our troubles, as ladies, stem directly from the triumph of the Christian religion in ancient Rome. For before that we had freedom, and since that time we have become no more than mobile vaginas, there for the taking at their whim to satisfy their gross appetites. 'Tis monstrous".

"All this I have heard" Meg admitted gravely, "and do believe. For Ursula instructed me greatly on the history of our sex and the disabilities under which we labour as ladies".

"Ay, 'tis so" Kate supplemented, "and here it is, sweet Joanna. We refuse to accept the position that men would force upon us. Thus you see us as we are, begirt in steel, ready and happy to fight to maintain our freedom, even if that means that we die the death of a knight, impaled on steel. This makes us not affeared, dear Joanna, rather do we glory in it. Is't not so, Meg?".

"'Tis so, dearest Kate" Meg replied, softly. "Since men will not grant a lady freedom, then, has she courage, she must reach out and take it, and defend it with her body's blood".

With great emotion, the nun whispered: "And you wonder why I do honour you both so. For had my life not been cast in this mould, I would have ridden with you. For this is a cause worth dying for".

"'Tis so" Meg stated eagerly, loving her spirit. "Yet stay. May it not be that yon spire I see over the trees is Horsham church? In truth, a loving friend makes mockery of distance. I had not realised that we had travelled so far".

Rusper was reached an hour after noon and nothing would do but that the two ladies should enter to greet the Prioress. So, leaving her men outside the walls, they dismounted and entered. The nuns greeted them with awed approval, the young ladies with giggling excitement. The Prioress sat them down, plying them with wine, the air being thick with compliments.

"Ladies" she opined, "you have reached out and plucked freedoms of which other ladies may only dream. It stands greatly to your credit. Within these walls we too enjoy freedoms. Yet you have great renown and all right thinking ladies honour you in their hearts. Joanna tells me of the enemies that lie in wait for you in your road. I will pray that you win safe home. Now you must partake of refreshment with us, and I will see that the servants take victuals to your men".

Lady Margaret had not really wished to spend so much time, yet she knew it would be churlish to refuse an offer so kindly meant. So simply removing gauntlets they ate with visors up, a simple meal, raising their wine to each other as the custom was. Then, after a last lingering embrace with Joanna, and much weeping, they left, promising to see her again before the year's end.

Once more in the saddle, Margaret spoke to her men. "Lads, 'tis later than I had hoped. 'Tis now something of four in the afternoon. 'Twill be dusk afore we reach home. If reach it we do. You know well what I mean. So ride we hard. And keep an eye open for

your comrades. It would go hard with us, I fear me, if they should miscarry. So push we on".

The prospect of a fight made Kate's heart beat the faster with eagerness. Even her intellectual appreciation of her death in no way minimised her zest for combat. It was the kind of woman she was; she was strong and brave, and with food and wine in her, she felt invincible. That it was not so, could not be so, never occurred to her. Not so, Lady Margaret, having much responsibility. But she knew the nature of men, and if a confrontation had to occur, the sooner it happened, the better. Within her own caste, she knew, victory in the field alone could cauterise the hate that Pelham held for her. So let it be.

One thing worked well. Her ten men were waiting where Knelle had instructed them to wait, in the village of Cuckfield. They were still in their houppelandes, which they now discarded at her order. They were now forty-two and she hoped it would be enough. Maybe she had ordered twenty and not ten? It could not be mended. So they pushed on, coming to Buckstede in the early evening. Here they rested the horses for an hour, for they had to be fresh if she wanted to cross Pelham's land at speed.

They walked up and down by the church, Meg and Kate, while the men squatted on the grass, throwing dice. Kate glanced at them askance, then touched Meg on her arm. "There will really be trouble, think you?".

Meg was a mite pettish. "Trouble? You know there will be trouble. The man hates us, but heartily".

"And yet" Kate remarked, a trifle anxiously, "he will not know we intended to return this day".

"We had no wagons. He will know". And Meg frowned at her. "You worry without cause. 'Tis summer. There is light to fight by".

Laughing, Kate said: "True". She wriggled her fingers in her gauntlets very happily, her heart beating like an iron forge hammer. Then she smote one steel hand into the other. It was quite delightful, fighting men. They were so arrogant in their strength, and so startled when they met their match, and more than their match, in a female frame. They always panicked. Meg's lips twitched, thanking God for her friend's guts; but she could always read Kate's blue eyes like a priest read his psalter. She kissed her in full view of the men.

"Strike lustily" she whispered.

"Do not doubt it" Kate whispered back, "I look forward to crushing Pelham pates!". Then: "Is no need to tutor me, Meg".

"So go we and meet what fate has for us. And if we have to drop we will do so like knights, in debonair fashion, will we not?".

Kate hugged her by way of reply. Then mounting, they moved forward. After a while Meg said what she knew had to be said to her friend. "Now, mark well what I say, Kate. If there is indeed combat and I am down, there must be no heroics. You will leave me".

"And myself likewise".

"Ay. If I fall, you will command and your duty is to get our men home to their wives and brood, and give no heed to me. One couch is as good as another".

"It shall be as you say" Kate lied, for she had no intention of leaving her lover on the cruel ground. "Where think you he will hit us?".

"I know where I would do it, were I him. Men say he is a man of war, thus we must not underrate his craft. So, for your question, at the three-went way, where our road rises. He would have us at a great disadvantage. Could be the difference between defeat and victory".

Kate knew that to be true. She thrust her sabatons further into the stirrups for greater security. The sun was sinking behind the trees and Kate thought that any ambush would long since have been abandoned. Yet was she wrong. Their road ran straight for some time, allowing a clear view of where the road rose. There they were, strung out, blocking their way. They had leisure to count them, thirty lusty rogues in Pelham livery, fronted by two heavily armoured men, one bearing the Pelham coat-of-arms, and the other with the arms of Colbrond, a family with whom the Pelhams were friendly, if not allied.

Kate gurgled: "One for you, and one for me! Shall I take Pelham or Colbrond?".

"Colbrond". Lady Margaret turned in her saddle to shout at her men. "Hit we them at a gallop. 'Tis our only chance. Spur!".

The shock of meeting was great. Pelham had a sword, she a mace. The sword crashed against her head but glanced away. She swung her mace twice at arm's length before bringing the spiked head up under his chin. The force of the blow was so great that he raised up in the saddle. She heard his roar of pain and struck him again, high up. He dropped, stunned and injured, his jaw broken. Her blow had been unorthodox, unlooked for; it was one of her great strengths. Not giving Kate a thought, she turned her attention to the common soldiers. It was everybody for themselves. Cralle was a brave woman, and a strong; in any case, she would have hated Meg for interfering.

Lady Margaret plunged into the melee using her mace to great and mortal effect. To do the Pelham men justice, they stood and fought dourly. All around her she heard the clash of steel, the cries and screams of dying men. It was meat and drink to her; she fought strongly, carving a scarlet path through her enemies. That is, until a mace crashed down on her backplate, having missed her head. The blow jarred every bone in her body.

Kate had had the most savage fight she had known. It was iron against steel all the way, two maces seeking destruction. As always, Kate fought gleefully, breathing through her nose, not gulping air in through her mouth. It was brutal. Colbrond grunted, and Kate's lips parted as she gasped. Yet she had almost finished him twice and would have done had he not been going back each time. "You craven dog" she snarled, "stand and fight like a man". She heard his short laugh. Kate knew he had not been provided for her, but to ensure that Meg did not leave that spot. Between them, it had been judged, they could easily mace 'Black Meg' to death. Yet it had not happened that way, and Kate was determined that it did not happen. Then, suddenly, there were Pelham men-at-arms between her and her enemy. She killed them and drove her horse to where he was making his way to attack Lady Margaret. Even if she died for it she had to keep him from Meg. They clashed in mortal contention.

The end for Kate was at least the fate of the brave, for the blow she took, high up on her bascinet, effectively settled her. Darkness gathered around her and she dropped from the saddle. Thus it was that Meg took the blow in the back.

Whirling her horse, she met Colbrond head on. Because he was there, Lady Margaret knew that Kate was down, possibly dead, and the hate in her heart was black, quite without pity. That hate seemed to double the strength of her well-muscled right arm. They had only exchanged three blows before she smashed in the protruding nose of his visor, altering the shape of his face. She heard the bones crack, with satisfaction. He screamed piercingly and fell inertly. Margaret thought bitterly, that will teach you to mix in other people's quarrels, you bastard.

She looked around for Kate, saw the shining body on her face in the road, still gripping her mace. The body moved not. Something like an icy hand gripped Margaret's heart and twisted it. But Kate was a fighter and had known the risks, welcome them. She would not have complained.

Turning her horse yet again, she helped to destroy the few Pelham men remaining. Nobody ran; they could have done, the woods were there, and she would not have pursued them. But they stood like Englishmen, grimly loyal to their master's interest, and died. It had been a battle royal. Pelham had tried and failed. Yet, as she could see, she had lost six of her men and yet more were wounded. She moistened her throat with spittle.

"Master Wenham, see if your Mistress is slain or lives".

She thanked her men. They had to come first, not Kate. Cralle would understand that, although Meg's whole being, her whole heart, her whole mind was with that silent body on the ground. She was suddenly aware that her right arm ached. She replaced her mace and swung her arm, flexing the muscles.

Knelle approached, noting her blood spattered jupon; it was even on her bascinet, her legs, her pointed sabatons; but he knew it was not hers. "A famous victory, Lady Margaret" he croaked, "but a warm".

"Think you? I count it no victory with so many of my brave fellows dead. Yet doubtless you are right, in some sort". She could be difficult, could Lady Margaret, he thought. A brave captain, but overly exercised about that Cralle bitch. May her hurt be mortal, he prayed. "Pelham will think twice afore he meets me in the field again" she went on proudly. "Who was that fellow I unhorsed? Not Pelham himself, sure?".

"Nay, some sprig doubtless. 'Twas a famous blow. See where the blood streams from his visor".

"Serves the bastard right. Have damned good eyes, John".

On the ground Wenham turned Cralle over and placed his ear to her face. "She lives" he reported with relief, fearing for his place, "doubtless stunned by a mace blow".

"Thank God!". Lady Margaret sounded dangerously near to tears Knelle thought. She signed herself piously. "Drape her over her horse, also our comrades, and let us all on".

"The men also?" Knelle wanted to know, incredulous. "Will slow us down, lady".

She stared at him with some distaste. "What kind of lady think you I am, John? When a man dies for me, the least he can expect is decent burial. Or would you have me leave them in the road, to be dragged into the forest and eaten by the boar? Fie! And Mistress Cralle is my beloved. I would give my life to protect hers".

"I say naught about Mistress Cralle" Knelle returned doggedly. "She is a gentlewoman, a lady of coat armour. But when I was in France with Knollys.....".

"I am not Robert Knollys" she said shortly, "I am Lady Margaret de Boxhull. More, I am not a man" - the word appeared to sear her lips - "I am a lady. We look at things differently". This last was so brusque as to make him colour.

It was actions like this that made her men love her and follow her into the jaws of Hell. So they rode, leaving the Pelham wreckage in the road. Nor did she look back.

It was nearly a league on their way, where the way to Kent diverged from the Battle road before Kate groaned. Margaret had been mighty worried and was much relieved to hear some signs of life. She had been riding with her left hand on Kate's body, carrying the reins of both horses in her right. Meg spoke soothingly, with much tenderness: "Lie still, Kate, and move not. Have been struck on the pate, no more. You will be well".

Five minutes later, Kate mumbled in very shame: "Meg, this is unseemly. Am able to ride".

Meg laughed softly, pridefully: "Art sure? You have a stout heart, Kate".

Not without wit, Cralle remarked: "Ay, and a stout head to go with it! I would not ride into Glottingham in this wise, Meg. I pray you let me ride in like a knight".

"Ay, and so do I honour you, Catherine de Cralle". She cried out "Halt!". Wenham leapt from his horse to catch his mistress as she slid to the ground. Immediately her hands flew to her helmet.

"By all the Saints!" she mumbled, "but the dog struck hard. My head pounds. Yet no matter. Thomas, place you my foot in the stirrup and I the rest will achieve". And so she did, turning to her friend. "So are we together again, Meg".

Taking her hand, Meg said softly: "Ay, together again. Also, dear Joanna is safe at Rusper; and we have had a battle with our enemy and live. Can any lady ask more? For the bastard who saw you off, he is dead or should be. I drove his visor into his face. That and a night on the ground should write finis to him. So are you well revenged".

"And Pelham?".

"Oh, he went early. I saw him not move again. I may have settled his account for blood flowed from his visor. I know not. I fancy I broke his jaw with my mace. Sir John Pelham can scarce complain. 'Tis kill or be killed, is't not?".

"That is the way of it. And I thank you, Meg".

"For what, may I ask?".

"Why, for slaying mine enemy, for a joyous adventure, for honourable deeds bravely achieved. I yearned for the fight, as you know. Life is so tame between combats".

"Despite the headache?".

"Pooh! What is a headache".

So it was that they won home at last, and there was no more cheering sight than the guttering torches of home, and no more comforting sound than the lowering of the portcullis behind them, and the crash of the drawbridge as it struck home.

They walked up the stairs to their chamber, Margaret's arm around Kate, and even before she had removed her helmet, Kate felt her mouth being kissed. "For I do know" Meg whispered, "the gallantry with which you kept Colbrond from me. But for you I might not be here. But let us to bed and count our bruises!". Cralle laughed.

The astonishing thing was that her battle with Pelham's men (not with Pelham himself, for as she learned later on, his wife of a few months, Margaret de Grey, she who had been wife to Thomas Shardelowe, had plumped down on her knees, saying: "Sweet my lord, I beseech you not to ride against this virago, who is so dangerous") brought Lady Margaret nothing but congratulation from fellow magnates, for all judged that Pelham had gone too far. He had, of course, good cause to make war and she, equally, had the right to defend herself; she chose to live as a man and had to take the rough with the smooth, even as did a man. So was there no outcry.

It seemed that Pelham had organised it all in a mighty hurry and since he could refuse his lady nothing, Pelham had acquiesced to her entreaty; but his nephew had most earnestly begged to be permitted to ride against this lady, of whom he had heard so much, saying: "'Tis but a wench after all is said and done. Nay, two. 'Twill be a goodly deed to destroy them" whereat Pelham, knowing the boy to be untried, yet with a mighty good opinion of his prowess, had hesitated, to his credit be it said. Then, in response to the boy's ceaseless importuning, Pelham had agreed, on condition that Colbrond rode with him. Lady Pelham, having snatched her lord's life from the fire, had no great care for aught else. "Ay, good my lord, this likes me well. 'Tis meet the boy should cut his teeth on these two bitches, who are mortal enemies to our house". Now, Colbrond, who had fought in France, was accounted an expert man. Yet he had no stomach for the matter, he having no quarrel with Boxhull, and 'the virago' was, after all, a lady, and one quite as expert as he. Her record spoke for itself. He dreaded having a lady's blood on his hands and the ill-fame that would accrue to him and his family by this deed. Yet because of friendship and because he was in debt to Pelham over divers matters, he rode.

Lady Margaret had a spy in Pelham's household, for she judged it politic to learn all she could about her enemy. The spy was well paid and loyal and it was from him that she learned of the grief in the Pelham house over the death of his nephew, and the crippling of Colbrond who, when he was lucid, cried for death constantly, for his injuries were truly frightful, turning him into a pain-wracked, slobbering imbecile. The guilt he felt weighed Pelham down mightily, and his lady often discovered him weeping in the chapel, a broken man. "Nay, good my lord" she would console, "how could you know? The woman is the very devil. And her familiar. I had thought for sure to hear of their deaths. But content you, good my lord, one day she will drop and we may rejoice. Until that time it would surely be politic to reach a peace with her. Nay, my lord, we may not sue; yet we have many friends who would mediate on our behalf, to the saving of our honour. Is't not so?". And Pelham, knowing she spoke great sense, nodded, reluctantly.

While all this was going on, the victors in the fight happily pursued their lives, basking in the approval of their kind. Of course, their armour needed attention, dents hammered out and the like. Kate's Flemish harness had taken a good deal of punishment and was no longer quite as pristine as it had been. She clucked her tongue over it, but Meg knew it was in sheer pride. Their bruises had turned from yellow to dark and now, as autumn crept into winter, their bodies returned to white satin. Kate was sorry to see the evidences of her valour go, at which Meg laughed uproariously and hugged her in sheer delight. It was a joy to have such a warrior lady in one's bed. But Ursula would have been the same, had she lived.

The winter of 1387 was a bad one. The snow started on Twelfth Night and when they woke in the morning the country was a foot deep in its virgin blanket. Meg and Kate, donning hooded fur cloaks, heavy and comforting, over their gowns, ascended to the tall tower and stared down the valley towards Echyngham. Their view included almost as far north as the vill of Tyshurst, and below it could be seen the white-crested battlements of Echyngham. "Of one thing we may be certain. Bess will not be able to come this week".

They stayed not long for it was pesky cold, and Kate liked not the bitter wind that came straight from Muscovy and nearly tore the skin from the face. She pulled the cloak closer around her and turned her back to the wind, looking at the silent land as far as Brightling to the west and at the interminable forest that spread north-west as far as the eye could see. "Mighty pretty" she remarked, through chattering teeth, "let us go in".

"So you are not moved to ride with us to Walsingham?"

Bess lifted her eyes from the roaring fire and gave her sister an amused look. "Nay, 'tis not something that attracts overmuch. And truly I would not have thought it would attract you, Meg. Have never noted you for piety".

The indomitable lady of Echyngham had found her way through the deep snow for her weekly visit to her sister. They sat drinking spiced wine and staring into the flames, snug and warm in their fur robes, and talking of summer. Kate was in her chamber, busy writing letters. Recently her conscience had stricken her; she had suddenly, through the will of a relation in the City of London, become a wealthy lady. The bequest was five thousand nobles; it was a fortune and needed careful handling. Part had been expended on a lease of a manor in Kent, while the rest was placed out to interest by a trustworthy merchant in the City, the same man indeed who handled Bess's affairs. So was Kate absent, for she took her duties very seriously indeed, although an absentee.

"Why, no more it does, Bess. Yet Kate wishes it, reminding me that it was the Blessed Virgin who appeared at Walsingham. And I can refuse her nothing. Remember, her gallantry with Colbrond spared me the tomb". She leaned forward and tapped Bess on the knee. "But next year are we intent on searching out harness in the Low Countries, and in Augsburg".

A flare of interest showed in Bess's eyes. "Would be greatly attracted to that, Meg, and would ride with you, if asked".

"That goes without saying. Might need your good right arm!".

"But what would Roger have said?!"

Meg laughed. "Happily, my lord and master is dead. But you are right. He liked not my journey to Bayonne".

"Yet it should be a venture worthy of ladies like we".

"So I think. But as to Walsingham, I feared you would say nay".

"I am amazed that Kate is interested, likewise".

"I too. Yet she has some small piety. Though I greatly fear she has other intentions". Bess raised an aristocratic eyebrow. "Her own words were: 'And consider what adventures we may find on the road'. At times she troubles me".

"Pooh! She is a brave wench, and a capable. If she is adventurous, what matters it?"

"It matters not at all. But I tell you true, Bess. On the way home from Rusper, I prayed nothing would befall. Yet she, I know, willed it to happen".

Bess's aquiline nose quivered in mock-disdain. "Come, sister. You trained her. Now you sit in judgement like some sour-faced priest".

"Nay, nay" Meg laughed, "'tis not so. I do love a wench of spirit, as you well know. Yet must there be moderation in all things. I hoped that crack on the pate she took from Colbrond would make her pause but 'twas not so, Bess. She glories in it. 'Tis a risk you take, Meg' quoth she, eyes a-dance, and 'I did see three Pelham rogues off afore I dropped'. Ay, a brave wench, but a quarrelsome".

"'Tis this you fear?". Elizabeth was incredulous. "Were I of your persuasion, I would glory having such a noble lady as my bedfellow".

"Why, I do, Bess. But I know well she seeks to slay a knight in personal combat".

"A not unworthy ambition for our class, and I seem to remember someone else.....".

"No doubt. I have often thought on this, and have regretted my folly. Had no right to send Harlakenden to his Maker".

"You had every right. You saved a peasant wench from rape. Even she who is your seamstress, if I mistake not, honourably married and with a brood decently begotten".

"This is justification?"

"Ay, of course. You lose sight of the light we have lived by. 'Tis an unending war against men, as you know well. Would have done the same, Meg. By all accounts he was a hog and deserved to die".

"Yet, was it my place?"

"You were but the instrument. I have enquired into this man, his deeds. Was no great ornament. Meg you did well. But whence comes all this philosophising? I like it not. Time was, you killed cheerfully and looked not back. And why not, by the Saints! Have killed men myself and regret nothing. Why should you? When a man's hand is against you, what can you do? So go on your travels with Kate. And if she picks a quarrel, then stand aside and let her have her man, and be proud of her".

"And should she drop?"

"Then be proud that she goes in the honourable manner of our kind. Forget not, there has to be someone, somewhere who is marked to settle our account. What matters it? We have said it often enough, sooner steel than disease. So Kate loves to fight. I honour her for it. So should you".

"Why, I do, Bess. The men tell me she played Chandos with yon Colbrond. But you'll mind how Chandos died?"

"The fool forgot to close his visor, or he would have died in bed, as like as not. Like Jane Alard, as you'll recall".

"Ay. 'Tis but that I love her so. I fear for her should she too often to the well go".

Elizabeth became impatient. "You are as a child affeared of shadows. Kate is a woman grown. Do I have to tell you that she loves you greatly, and her only wish is to emulate you? Canst not see this is her way of earning her spurs, making her fit to share your bed?"

"Which she already does".

"Ay, but think of it, Meg. Young men still ride to war seeking deeds to make them worthy of their lady's love. Kate does no more. Knighthood is not granted to ladies, more's the pity, yet our lives prove that we are so, even though we have not been dubbed. So let me hear no more of this. Rejoice that you have so gallant a bedfellow".

So it was that, come summer, Lady Margaret took herself to the road with an excited Kate Cralle. If she did not ride with trepidation, she rode with foreboding.

They first rode to London where the two ladies and their body servants lodged at the Tabard in Southwark, the two squires remaining with the men-at-arms, and the wagons, outside the city.

Despite this it was their custom to stay in religious houses, preferably nunneries, but when that was not possible in other houses where hospitality was kept.

A pilgrimage was held to be a meritorious act in itself, symbolic of man's journey to the Heavenly Kingdom. This is why Lady Margaret raised little objection to Kate's importunings. Bess had gone on pilgrimage to Canterbury and had found the kind of people who flocked to Becket's tomb highly distasteful; the motley, ribald crowd offended her sensibilities. Walsingham, however, was entirely different.

The pilgrims who went to Walsingham were largely from the better families. You did not have to rub shoulders with the inferior, the unwashed. The rich and upper class thronged to Walsingham and this element of snobbery seemed to persist at the Norfolk shrine up to the Dissolution. Nor was there an excess of piety and it was really little more than a totally acceptable way of socialising with one's own class. For most treated it as the high point of a holiday, an excuse to escape from the daily routine and see a little of England outside one's castle or manor house walls.

On leaving Southwark you first crossed London Bridge and then crossed the city, which in those days did not take long, for once you had navigated Bishopsgate, you were in open country. Lady Margaret had it in mind to cover the slightly in excess of fifty miles to Cambridge in that day. They did so, but not without hazard.

In retrospect it annoyed her that she had not foreseen it. She should have accepted the risk, considering the road was one of the most used in the kingdom. Their way lay through the great Forest of Essex, which even in her day was becoming known as the Forest of Waltham. A royal forest, they were far from expecting trouble. Indeed, Margaret was conversing normally with Kate, telling her that the great mercenary soldier, Sir John Hawkwood, was born in the county of Essex, at Sible Hedingham. She had discoursed very knowledgeably, telling of his rise from being the son of a tanner to the ranks of knighthood, when a dozen or so arrows flew from the dark caverns to their right. Margaret swore and caught the one that dropped harmlessly from her breastplate. She cried: "Spur!" which everyone did. It would have been folly to do anything else; she preferred her enemies out in the open where she could get at them.

Jack Akehurst cursed, pulling an arrow from his jack. Margaret was astonished that anyone should attack such a large and well equipped party. An arrow crashed into Kate's bascinet, roughly where her ear was, and another hit the point, and flew off, no man knew whither. "Damnation!" she snapped, "will this folly never end?"

"Nay" Knelle growled, "and a pox on all hidden archers, say I".

Meg laughed. "One knows not the hour or the day. Yet they were plaguey bad marksmen. Were Ursula living, she would stand and let them shoot at her for a penny a shoot!". Knelle grunted, knowing it to be true. "But worry not, my friends, from now on 'tis open country, no shelter for outlaws. Shall have no trouble".

Nor did they. The flatness of the land was dispiriting, and Margaret explained: "We now approach that part they call the Fens. In winter 'tis a pesky cold part of realm, for the winds fly across the dismal land without hindrance. Yet today, being May, 'tis warm enough".

On arrival in Cambridge the two ladies found lodging at the Carmelite house, while the men camped outside the Trumpington Gate. The following morning was spent viewing the town, which, they learned, had had many disturbances in the revolt of 1381, and in the afternoon moved on to Ely.

Here they took time to view the cathedral, and marvelled at the great octagonal tower, which in that time was relatively new. As the day was much spent, they stayed overnight at the Abbey.

In the morning they proceeded onward to Downham Market, where they turned east to Sporle, and so to Walsingham. A man was sent ahead to arrange accommodation, while they rested and ate by the roadside. The road from Sporle onwards was much used, and as they rested, a very rich and very bored ancient nun passed by her servants; and even as they watched her do so, from the opposite direction came a lord, with a sizeable entourage and several wagons. Both ladies read the Bohun arms with ease.

Then it was on to Walsingham to find their accommodation at the Maison Dieu. The morning after they made pilgrimage to the shrine and gave gifts. It was pleasant to be in gowns again after so many days in the saddle, and to find themselves the centre of attraction, when socialising.

Yet all too soon it was time to take the Norwich road. Here they spent two days and drank far too much, so much so that Kate, on the morning after their arrival, awoke with a very thick head indeed. Margaret laughed at her, saying that she was her own worst enemy; but it was not long before both were viewing the city, attended by their servants and the two squires. It amused Knelle greatly to see how shopkeepers fawned on the two great ladies with their seemingly bottomless purse. "What d'ye lack?" was the cry on all sides. For the tactics of shopkeepers do not change from age to age when confronted with two females, especially when they are rich. Both bought a pair of gloves, richly embroidered, over which there was much sighing before purchase, which led Knelle to the not surprising conclusion that despite their aggression, and their steel, they were still ladies, self-indulgent and frivolous.

After the two days they moved on, Margaret reminding a reluctant Kate, pouting quite adorably, that they still had a week to spend in London, at which she brightened considerably.

Thus it was that on the following morning, armed and ready for anything, they took the road to Thetford, travelling by way of Wymondham and Attleborough. They rode into Thetford quite late

in the day to take up lodging at the Benedictine nunnery. As Lady Margaret lay on her pallet that night she had no idea what was to happen on the morrow; but in that no-man's land between waking and sleep she smiled as she thought of the heated conversation between herself and Bess in April.

Meg had advertised her intention, it being a holiday and all, to wear light or 'jazzeran' armour. This was no more than mail, with a silk lining that made it comfortable to wear. It was greatly in favour with the nobility in camp and castle when serious business was not in prospect. Expensive it was, and was not long lasting due to wear and tear on the silk; but it was a luxury that the nobility could afford, giving some kind of protection and enabling one to look attractive into the bargain. Bess had such a garment herself, but on this April afternoon she came as near to exploding as she ever did.

"Meg, are you quite mad?"

"'Twill be quite sufficient" Meg had returned, placidly, "the land is at peace".

"Ay, the land is at peace" supplemented Kate, in a small voice, her eyes flicking between the two sisters apprehensively.

Bess turned on her. "That is your considered opinion, is it, Kate?". Cralle coloured, lowering her blue eyes to her silk gown, mighty embarrassed.

"You think there is danger, Bess?" Meg wanted to know.

"There is always danger" came the snapped reply. "You of all people should know that. Jazzeran armour forsooth! I would not travel to Glottingham in it. Have more respect for my life".

"The peasants are cowed, Bess. What ails you?"

"For the moment they are cowed. But the revolt settled naught. A pedlar, a palmer, a priest may travel without risk, for often they are as poor as church mice. But the nobility, travelling with many wagons, are always at risk. There are good pickings to be had from such as you. Remember always, dear sister, that all men are trained to arms from the age of fifteen as law provides and there are many lusty rogues more than willing to prey on rich pilgrims. Jazzeran armour indeed!"

Meg had held up her hands in token of surrender. "You are right, sister, as usual. I know well mail is no protection against a clothyard arrow. We will ride fully armed. But I will be damned if I will wear a bevor(*)".

Bess laughed heartily. "Nay, 'twill not be necessary to go thus far. The aventail will be protection enough".

And so it was determined; and on the morrow Meg had good reason to bless her sister's far-sightedness. So, more importantly as it turned out, had Catherine de Cralle.

It was about two leagues out of Thetford, travelling south on a mighty lonely road, that they saw a cloud of dust in the distance. Nobody thought much about it, not then, but soon it became evident that it was a rider, coming fast. Lady Margaret ordered her men to halt, and form into single file, which they all did but Kate, who merely backed her horse into the space between Margaret and Knelle. It should have been quite sufficient.

(*) Bevor = gorget, a protection for the throat. Late in the 14th century it became indispensable in a complete harness and for what was known as 'serious business'.

It became obvious that the rider was a person of quality, well armoured, coming fast. Margaret regarded him well through the slit in her helmet. The harness was much the same as her own, and Kate's; but whereas theirs was smooth plate, his was quite incredibly rich, much decorated and chased, such as a nobleman might wear. Meg raised an eyebrow. He wore no jupon, so she had no means of reading his quality from his arms but obviously a man of some consequence.

The head of Kate's horse protruded slightly from the line and whether by accident or sheer carelessness, the flank of the fellow's horse brushed Cralle's mount, which reared. Knelle's horse shied, as did Margaret's. Kate was too good a horsewoman to be unhorsed but if she did not lose her seat, she lost her temper, with some reason it must be admitted.

"You clumsy oaf!"

The words ripped from Kate angrily, and Meg's heart lurched in her breast. The fellow heard, reined in, and returned. Meg heard Knelle's intake of breath. Those words were not such as you addressed to a member of your own kind. A peasant, yes, but not to a person of gentle birth. If you felt like saying it, you bit your tongue off, for the consequences that would almost inevitably follow, could be fatal. Sitting there, Meg was not sure whether Kate's words were involuntary or deliberate. True, she was truculent and quarrelsome but surely she could not be unaware of the insult she had offered to an equal. True, her horse had reared but the high saddle alone was an argument against the indignity of a fall. Kate was a born rider, highly competent and had never been known to part company with any mount. Another thing Meg was never sure of was whether the fellow was just clumsy or a quarrelsome fool, seeking to advance his reputation by fighting a member of his own class. Of one thing, Lady Margaret was quite certain. There would be trouble. Had Kate been in a gown she might well have pricked the man's generosity and her words written off as female impetuosity. But she was in harness from toe to head and that immediately put her on the man's level. She was dressed for war and that, as Margaret well knew, was what would happen. Her heart sank. Kate, Kate, my gallant friend, she thought, what have you done?

The fellow pushed his horse aggressively up to Cralle's. "What said you?"

Behind her, Knelle muttered: "By God's teeth! Now the fat be in the fire in good truth!"

Meg knew it, but there was nothing she could do. By the code of the time, this was a personal quarrel between two members of the nobility, in which she could not interfere. Nor was it only that. Even had it been possible, interference would have diminished Kate in the eyes of the men, which she would never do. Moreover, Cralle would never have forgiven her. Kate had got herself into the situation, and she would have to get herself out. In the few seconds before the explosion, she made an assessment.

The man too was in a difficult situation. Words had been said which he could not overlook. Cralle had been spoiling for a fight such as this for a long time. Well, so be it. If you carried a sword you were expected to know how to defend yourself. However one looked at it, it was Kate's quarrel. She had to look after herself. And in a perverse way, Meg wanted her to.

All Kate's dedicated training had been leading to this very moment. She had slaved at it, making herself strong. It was not only weapon training. Every morning she spent time squeezing a

leather ball tight packed with horse hair. As a result, her right shoulder was large, with strong muscles. Kate detested men and their arrogance, and would die sooner than play the woman before the Boxhull men-at-arms. They would laugh at her if she did, sniggering behind their hands. The thought brought Kate out in a cold sweat.

"I think you heard me well" Kate flared.

"Mistress" grated the man, "for Mistress I take you to be by your voice despite your warlike trappings. Unless you beg my forgiveness, I must slay you. You have a goodly sword by your side, by which token I presume you know how to use it. For all that, I give you the chance to withdraw. I would not have a lady's blood on my conscience. Admit you were in the wrong, and I let you live".

Margaret closed her eyes and waited for the explosion. Kate never apologised to any man. Her near screech of fury was heard by everyone, right back to the driver of the second wagon. "Beg your forgiveness? I in the wrong? You lie, dog! Again I name you a clumsy, misbegotten oaf!".

There was not a man in the party who did not hold Kate Cralle a dead woman, harness or no harness, courage or no courage. They grinned, man-like, at the prospect of a fight. At the back, a bearded man-at-arms whispered to his comrade: "An esterling agin' your dagger, she survives not". The man grinned: "Done! And serve the perverted bitch right. Worth losing a dagger to see that". Margaret was likewise fearful, yet she had instructed her without stint. It depended on whether Kate's rage drove all her lessons from her mind.

On hearing Cralle's calculated insult, the man had little more to say. "Your name, Mistress? Would know the bitch I slay".

"Catherine de Cralle" came the proud reply, "and you are a knave and a braggart, unworthy of this, mine sword".

He went for his sword and Cralle for hers. The truth was that Margaret did her a terrible wrong. Kate's brain was cold, and had made her plan long before throwing the man's offer back in his face. To her, Meg's lessons were as tablets handed down from the mountain. She forgot nothing.

Kate reared her horse deliberately, until the flailing hooves were level with his body. He cursed, striving to control his mount, which shied away, cavorting and neighing in terror. While he was so engaged, Cralle, having controlled her own beast, gained his side and struck him a mighty blow on his neck, below the visor, where the aventail lay. The violence of the blow not only scarred the mail, but bent and weakened some links.

Meg started to relax, smiling, taking her bedfellow in from her long spurs to the smooth rear of her bascinet. But could she really mean to kill the fellow? That she did. She had aimed for, and found, the protuberance that men call 'the Adam's apple'. He choked, retching; Kate drove her sword with all her might at the scarred and bent links. They held under her blow, but she knew he would die. She could afford to wait. Just give me time, she told herself, and you are food for maggots and worms.

As yet she had taken not one blow! This was soon remedied, yet her initial advantage was great. For the third time she drove hard at his throat. This time the links gave slightly, and the point of her sword penetrated, picking at his throat, above the collar of his mail tunic. The fellow must have been seized with blind panic for he attacked her wildly, in snarling fury; but she could afford to bide her time, giving back blow for blow.

Now, no combat was that simple and Cralle knew it. Punishment she was taking, and harsh punishment it was. Meg, who counted herself something of an expert, was later to say to Bess, in some awe: "Have never seen such gallantry; nay, nor such savagery". And this was true. They were close, knee to knee, greave to greave, sabaton to sabaton. Previously it had gone Kate's way but now he concentrated on her bascinet. Kate, by now something of an old hand, swayed in the saddle and his first blow struck the conical top of the helmet where it rested on the arming cap. Kate laughed mockingly but her laugh ended in a groan for the next blow caught her near the temple, and she stiffened. Near helpless, dazed, she inclined slightly backward, her sword arm rigid.

Margaret felt sick, for she knew what was going on inside her helmet. Kate's red lips would be slack, her mouth open; the peerless blue eyes staring through the slit and not registering what she saw. Now the visor of the bascinet was deep, deeper than the rest of the helmet; yet, with her head inclined backwards the fellow had a few inches to aim at. Meg stole a quick glance at Knelle's grinning face; he shrugged unconcernedly. Ay, Meg thought, it would suit him very well if Kate falls. Then came the third blow; it was ferocious, with the point. Kate's aventail took the force of the blow and the point did not even penetrate to the mail that surrounded her throat. It was the quality of her harness that saved her. Yet the force of the blow caused her to give a little cry of pain.

Perhaps it was that very pain that brought her to herself, or the pain and a sudden knowledge how close the wind of death had come. At all events she sat erect in the saddle, trading blow for blow again. Meg heard her laugh, a hard, pitiless laugh that chilled even her mentor. Kate's blood was up. If she took care, she knew she had him, scenting death, even as the hound does a stricken fox. For him the ignominy of being slain by a woman was soul-scarring. Too late he appreciated his folly in not finishing her while she was at his mercy. It was impossible that he, a man, should die at her hand. Yet when she drove at him again, putting all her strength behind the upward thrust, her sword went clean through the weakened aventail, above his mail tunic, and straight through his neck, clanging against his bascinet at the rear. Twisting her sword cruelly, she drew it back.

The fellow screeched, dropping his sword. He literally rose up in the stirrups, hands clutching uselessly at his throat before pitching forward into the road. Nobody could really believe it had happened. The fellow was on his back, kicking, blood pouring through the aventail and over his breastplate. Meg stared at Cralle's back in total awe. As an act of demolition, of total war, it could hardly be bettered. The Boxhull men muttered together, approving yet trying to suppress their resentment. That a woman, even a strong one, should be able to slay a man so comprehensively troubled them. If the despised sex could do such deeds, what then was to become of men?

Kate stared down at her victim, complacently. He had ceased to kick, his heart ceased to pump; he was in Abraham's bosom as the saying was. Kate's heart swelled with pride. Now she was truly the equal of Margaret. Ever since she had heard of Meg's slaying of Harlakenden, she had wanted this for herself. But she fully intended to savour her triumph, even to the dregs.

"Master Wenham" she called, "I would have his armour. 'Tis my due. Into the wagon with it". It was indeed her due; yet all men marvelled how sweet and womanly her voice was, after such a deed.

Margaret cleared her throat. "John, pray aid Master Wenham. Time is a-wasting". Knelle did as he was bid, moving quickly and very expertly about his task. Knelle worked from the foot, Wenham from the top. Cralle watched every movement the squires made with an almost gluttonous intensity. It was as if her mind was making an inventory of each piece of harness, from spurs to bascinet. She was the less inclined to pity, because she realised only too well that it might have been her being stripped in that Norfolk road. Then the plate was carried off to the wagon and the man lay in his mail, helmetless, mouth open, eyes staring.

Kate was quite remorseless. "Thomas" she sighed, deceptively gentle, "I would have it all".

Wenham, not approving, unlaced the padded suit upon which the mail was stitched, and drew it from the man leaving him near enough naked. Kate laughed in cruel mockery as she saw that even in death the man's member was distended. "Now, Thomas" she went on, "propel me him into the ditch. 'Tis the place for such as he". Wenham did as he was bid. "So am I content. But will you not cleanse my sword of the creature's blood?". He cleaned it in the grass; she slammed it back into the scabbard, supremely arrogant, and beyond measure proud of herself.

Lady Margaret raised her hand. "Let us move on, Forward!". To Kate she cooed: "Have wanted to do that for a long time, isn't it not so?".

"Ay, you are in the right of it. I am now worthy to share your bed".

"You were always worthy. Yet I understand you well".

Dreamily, Cralle murmured: "My first real fight. Peasants and outlaws count not".

"Ay, your first. Unless you count Colbrond".

"I failed with Colbrond. The bastard laid me on the ground. And I like not to fail".

"Nobody does".

"Was it not well done?".

"Superlatively well done. You remembered my lessons".

"Ay. It really is fun to fight like that".

"So it is. As I always say, providing you win".

"As you won with Harlakenden. How I envied you on that day".

"I know it". There was a pause. "Yet I ask myself who he was. He bore no arms".

"What matters it? He was of gentle birth, almost without question of some rank. His armour was rich".

"Of that there is no question".

"I was in the right, was I not? He was a clumsy oaf?".

"Undoubtedly".

"And my anger was justified?".

"Of a surety. Would probably have done the same. I am proud that you are mine friend".

"Truly?". The hand that wreaked so much havoc, reached out and clasped hers.

"Truly, as I will prove to you this night. Yet I would not have you go too often to the well. I fear I am a bad example to you, Kate".

"The best example as ever was".

"If you say so, my own one".

Warmly came the reply: "I do say so. Think on't, Meg. Both of us are free, our own woman. We are rich, and fear no man. Tell me of any other ladies who can say as much, setting aside Bess".

"I know of none".

"So do I hold my case proved". She chuckled. "I do think of the poor wretches, spinning, weaving, and embroidering an infinity of cushions. May the good Lord preserve me from such a fate!".

That night they lay at Ickleton in Cambridgeshire and Meg had the leisure to inspect Cralle's body minutely. She gently ran her finger over her face and head. Kate winced as the probing finger reached her temple. "Ah!" Meg murmured, "it surprises me not at all". She kissed her tenderly. "You realise, naturally, that you were nearly slain?".

Cralle smiled up at her. "I am no fool, Meg".

Meg lifted the fair hair and pursed her lips. The white skin was yellowing mightily. "I thank God for your Flemish steel, Kate. 'Tis a famous bruise".

"Which is as much as to say" came the witty rejoinder, "always pay as much as you can for harness". And when Meg would have further spoken, she placed a finger on her lips. "Nay, now, do not spoil it for me, Meg. I know it is your love speaks, yet know this. I enjoyed the killing of that fellow. Yet I know you feared for me, and ay, he nearly had me. Yet believe it if you may, I would have gladly died in that cause. What is it that Bess always says? Is it not that the war against men goes on ceaselessly in every century? Also that there is someone, somewhere destined to settle our account? When it comes, I am ready, as doubtless are you. So enough of this" she laughed, in rather embarrassed fashion, "let us rather make love". And Meg, having made obeisance to her gallant spirit, took her in her arms.

In the morning, when the old, but lack-lustre nun brought their frugal breakfast, Kate mentioned that they had a friend at another house of their Order in Sussex, to wit, Rusper. There was a flare of interest in the old eyes. "Rusper" came a quavering reply, "I am myself Sussex born and Rusper was the place of my novitiate".

"Say you so?" Kate remarked, surprised. "Know you Joanna de Kingesford?".

"Well did I know her. She is now Prioress, as I hear tell".

"Ay, but 'tis rather her niece, another Joanna, that we know best" Meg supplemented. "But tell me, Sister, knew you another friend, one Ursula de Ukkefeld?".

Something like a smile spread over the old lady's face. "I left Rusper in 1378" she wheezed, "but well do I remember Mistress Ursula. A wild girl, scatterbrained, full of pranks and whimsies, yet lovely and greatly regarded by everyone".

"Ay, that will be her, right enough" Meg sighed, softly. "She was slain in the revolt, did you know?".

"Nay, I knew not". The nun signed herself. "I will pray for her soul. Those devils of peasants! Had much trouble here. We were roughly handled, the sacrilegious fellows. Yet I bear no grudge, though 'twas frightening for sheltered ladies. You are of the world and understand my meaning".

They understood only too well, and remembered only too well. The years slid away as if they had not been. It was rather too painful and they left with all convenient haste.

Their week in London was gay and indulgent, with much shopping and visiting of others of their persuasion, for Kate's knowledge of what she called "friendly houses" was profound. Then there were other visitings, for Bess had given them messages to deliver to her friends both at Westminster and in the City, with whom she still kept up correspondence. These visits brought them much entertainment.

As they were borne between Westminster and the City, they passed where Elizabeth's house had stood in 1381 and Meg was interested to note that a goodly stone house had been raised on the site. "Nay, 'twas no real loss to Bess" she explained, "she had it only on lease, the term whereof had nearly expired".

They were out much later at night than was seemly, and on at least one occasion, after a wild and highly indecorous night in the City, returned to their lodging at dawn with Knelle and other armed servants to protect them, very much the worse for wine, full of giddy talk and much giggling.

Meg pointed out to Kate the brothel areas like Slut's Hole, Gropecuntlane and Codpiece Alley, thereby causing much merriment not only to Kate but to the men surrounding them. Knelle pulled at his beard, trying to stop himself from laughing and failing signally. The truth was, he knew more of such places than his mistress would ever know.

Yet it was the shops that really attracted them, and they haunted much the goldsmiths, the linen drapers, haberdashers and hosiers, but also the armourers, where Kate bought a pair of gauntlets. Meg bought herself a jewelled dagger, with three rubies cunningly set into each side of the hilt. "'Tis mint new from France, lady" said the man, "'twill sit well at your waist". He spoke true and she succumbed. Yet it was not a dagger for work, but for a formal occasion. Then she bethought her: "I have no great opinion of English armourers, my friend. Have you aught from Italy?". The man regarded her well, noting her as one of the rare ladies who knew good steel when she saw it. "I have complete armours in plenty, from Milan, from the Low Countries and from Tours in France, yet the French harness is greatly sought by a lord at King Richard's court, and is not therefore for sale". He tapped his head, as though something had just occurred to him. "Yet I have some fine bascinets from Italy, but recently arrived". He scampered away and returned bearing one that made Kate gasp in delight; even Meg's heart beat the faster. It was trimmed with brass, even where the aventail was attached; but what thrilled them was that the very deep visor also had the brass trim on four sides and here it was highly decorated, chased as the word is. Meg tapped the steel with her knuckle and inspected the mark of the armourer. It was fine steel, plainly of Italian make. She tried hard not to let her excitement show in her face. She gave it to Kate, pointing out the depth of the visor. "Had you had it on, that Norfolk fellow would never have reached your throat. Would have been impossible". Kate nodded, excitedly. "Ay, 'tis so, Meg. Must have it, must we not?". Meg turned to the armourer. "Admitting the visor not to be quite as deep when wearing the arming cap.....you have two, Master?". He smiled. "Ay, lady, I have six. 'Twill become popular with persons of quality". Meg nodded. "I doubt it not. If you can loan us a arming cap, we will try them for size". On leaving the shop she threw an amused glance at Kate: "That fellow is richer by our call, Kate. Think you we shall ever bring ourselves to use such fine helmets?". Kate giggled.

"It is passing strange" Meg opined the next day, as they sauntered at their ease in Cheapside, all rustling magnificence, "yet Bess states that in the time of Edward III there were great tournaments held in this street, which the king and good Queen Philippa did attend. Much before our time it was, yet seeing it now 'tis difficult to believe, so given as 'tis to the cause of trade".

"Would that I had seen it" Kate sighed, "and 'tis a thousand pities that ladies are not permitted to partake of that exercise. What fun 'twould be to unhorse a man with a lance".

"You say true" Meg nodded. Then later: "Had I been a man - which God forbid! - I would have ridden with the Teutonic knights and brought religion to the heathen Lithuanians. Or followed the profession of arms elsewhere. Even this year could we have fought for Queen Margaret of Denmark against the Swedes". (*)

"You say true, Meg, and to die in such a cause would be worthy, I think, and a goodly end for such as we". She laughed bitterly. "Yet being ladies we have to stay by the fireside, gazing into the embers".

Meg stood still in the street and laughed. "You say that with a straight face? You who recently killed a man in personal combat. We do very well, it seems to me".

Cralle giggled gleefully. "Do we not, Meg! And his harness is fine. 'Twill fit me with but small amendment. Shall wear it I think on special occasions. Master Wenham is mighty jealous".

"Ay, you might take a hammer to it and do it no scathe. Of a surety Wenham is jealous. Such a harness is beyond his purse. But 'twas a fine piece of work you did with that Norfolk fellow. I do worship you, Kate, for your valour". Cralle's cheeks dimpled in pure joy. "And next year we go into the Low Countries, and to Augsburg in Swabia. Bess will ride with us. And at her suggestion we may ride on, through the land of the Swiss, even to Milan and return through France to the narrow seas. 'Twill be a hazardous journey, fraught with many dangers doubtless. Yet we snap our fingers at danger, do we not?".

Kate's squeal was unalloyed delight. "A most gallant enterprise".

"So I think. And shall we go well attended". She shrugged. "It may be that some of us will leave our bodies along the way. Who knows? But 'tis no matter. 'Twill be a joyous venture, and a journey I have long purposed to undertake". She paused. "And yet Master Knelle is much against it, speaking of great perils".

"Knelle is an old woman" Cralle said softly. "He will do as he is told. As will Wenham. You give Knelle too much latitude, Meg".

It was the day after this conversation that they rode for home. Knelle paid the reckoning and they departed early. "Can easily be at Glottingham afore nightfall". Knelle nodded without speech. He had overheard Cralle's words the previous day, and he was mighty put out.

They called at Echyngham, only to be told by Shoyswell that Lady Elizabeth was at Glottingham. Bess took her sisterly duties very seriously, spending every other day at Glottingham, knowing full well that men needed a firm hand. She had not known precisely when to expect them, but was delighted at their return. Meg had said a month but quite expected her to be ensnared by the flesh-pots of London.

(*) Lady Margaret referred to the battle of Falkoping 24.2.1389 where Albert of Sweden was defeated and captured. It was a desperate conflict, with immense casualties.

Soon the ladies were in each others arms and presents were handed over to Bess. When she heard of the conflict she held Kate at arms length, before kissing her tenderly. Her eyes shining, she murmured: "You are a most valorous lady". Looking over her shoulder she added: "Is't not so, Meg?". Meg said, ay, it was so but not wishing her bedfellow to get over-confident, she pointed out that Kate had nearly been slain, to which Bess said: "Pish!" as usual. When she inspected the man's armour, she came as close to enthusiasm as she ever did. "That is a harness to treasure, even to pour a libation to" - she signed herself in contrition - "but at least the man must have been a great noble". She fingered the decoration lovingly. "Yet, Kate, will have to get a new aventail fitted. That sword o' thine has made a great mess of the links. Let not an English armourer loose on it, not your man here, Meg; nor mine, come to that. But stay, I know a most skilled Italian in the City. Come, Kate, allow me to have it seen to for you. It shall be my gift. My tribute to a gallant lady".

Kate blushed like a peony and was profuse in her thanks. "'Tis most generous, Bess".

Meg's eyes twinkled at her discomfiture. "But there is something else Bess will like to see. Run and get them, Kate". When they were alone she explained. "'Tis something you may want yourself, Bess. Though it 'tis so beautiful.....almost so beautiful that I can hardly bring myself to using in serious combat. Only a master armourer could create such a thing". And when Bess saw the magnificent bascinets, she gasped and took one, viewing it as if it were a treasured relic.

"Meg, I am truly angered. Knowing my love of fine arms, why did you not buy one for me? But it matters not. Shoyswell shall ride to London in the morning bearing the spoils of Kate's combat to the Italian I spoke of. But first shall he call at the armourer's shop. I would have such myself. Yet you say true. How could one wear it into action? 'Tis a thing of beauty".

So saying, they ate together; then, quite late, she rode for Echyngham. In early June the evenings are long.

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Then in the autumn of 1389 Lady Margaret decided to make one of her periodic and unheralded descents on her son's estate in Dorset. Yet her mind misgave her as she told Kate, chin in hand, one evening, as they sat at their ease. "Have never ridden to Bryanston without trouble" she mused. "If it is not out-laws, 'tis disbanded soldiers, leaderless rogues maintaining themselves by robbing the travellers to the west. The port of Southampton is close by, mind, with all that entails. Nay, my mind misgives me. No matter, 'tis necessary to go and so, a fig for danger, say I".

Like any good mother, her son was always in her thoughts, and as he had grown she had taken more and more interest in him. Like other boys of his class, he had been packed off to the household of a nobleman as a page, in his case that of Thomas de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick.

If she loved her son, he loved her, despite the fact (or perhaps because of it) that he had had to fight for her good name with his fellow pages. Meg rarely saw him because his duties kept him out of Sussex but she kept an eye on his estate, though relying greatly on the steward, a good man and honest - as far, that is, as any steward was honest. It was expected that a steward would line his pockets to a degree, but as long as it was done with

discretion, Lady Margaret was not disposed to complain too strongly. Yet she was greatly given to making unheralded visits. And now, of course, she had an additional reason for doing so, since she could call at Rusper on both the outward and homeward journey. Needless to say, Kate was delighted. Life within castle walls could be mighty tedious, without the spice of danger. Her eyes therefore shone.

"Yet, Meg, what o' the Pelhams? Faced with such hatred.....".

"I run from no man. If necessary, will fight our way through. Though indeed, a last brush with him was a close run thing".

This was the Meg that Kate loved. "Yet, dear soul, would it not be politic to make peace with Pelham? There is no way to avoid the family. They are at Warbleton. They are at Laughton, nigh unto Lewes. And they are at Pevensey. Wherever you look, there are Pelhams, and their friends. We are much hated. Would to God I had slain Colbrond and so shared the hate".

Meg smiled. "Oh, you share it, Kate, you share it. 'Twould go hard with you were you captured by Pelham. But as to peace, I will not sue for it when all I would receive is a buffet in the mouth. Yet he will not meet me in the field again. Has learned his lesson from what I hear. So, leave we at night and pass by Pelham land before dawn".

"You are doubtless right. Yet do I regret Colbrond. Recognised him at once from his strange arms - three levels on a blue shield. They come, do they not, from Wartling way? I nearly had him twice, I recall, but I fear he had no stomach for the fight, for ever backing away. Give me a man who will stand and fight, trade blow for blow until one drops".

"Yet he did well to fear you, Kate".

"Why, so I think" came the proud reply. "Yet I do despise a man who fears to meet me in combat. Had he no stomach for it, why did he ride?".

"To please Pelham, doubtless, for he was much in his debt. And there is friendship. Yet he was not equal to the task. The fool should have stayed at home. Would not be now fed with a spoon by his lady".

The truth was, Lady Margaret hated leaving a man a cripple. Death was infinitely preferable. Had she brained him with her mace it would have been kinder. It was womanly compassion. It was a brutal time, and when you fought you fought to kill. Chivalry was a concept for the gleeman; it was not real life. Her father had warned her sternly: 'Now, mark me, Meg. Once you are in harness, no man will spare for the female form'. And so indeed she had found it. Men adjudged her a hard woman. But she had to be.

Thus, one September morning they rode while it was yet dark. They had been armed about midnight and had dozed until the appointed hour. Then they rode and by dawn were far beyond Buckstede and moving west as quickly as might be. Margaret and Kate could hardly wait to reach Rusper, and Joanna was overjoyed to see them. She warned them of reports of brigands operating to the south in the forest ways towards the county of Southampton. Meg shrugged, affecting a nonchalance she was far from feeling. From Glottingham to Dorset it was all forest and anyone who went this way took their lives in their hands. That was why she and Kate, despite the discomfort, wore a bevor to protect their throats from anything from an arrow to a mace blow. In the morning they went on their way.

On this occasion Lady Margaret travelled without wagons. Wagons slowed one down, and she wanted mobility rather than provisions. She had thirty men-at-arms behind her, tough, disciplined fellows on whom she could rely up to the gates of Hell. There was Kate and her squire, Thomas Wenham, who carried the full purse; for it was decided that they would either buy what they wanted, or live off the land. Knelle had been left at home in charge of the castle, which had aggrieved him somewhat, but no matter.

The first spot of bother they encountered was between Middehurst and Peteresfeld in Southampton county, wherein a party of travellers were under attack from the brigands that Joanna had warned them of. It was the usual sorry scene - an elderly nun lay on her back with an arrow in her. Wenham growled: "She'll say her rosary no more". Cralle told him sharply to shut his mouth, if he could not open it to greater purpose. Wagons were overturned, men dead, belongings scattered, and there was little Meg could do but chase off the brigands. She and Kate charged at them but they, with more discretion than guts, fled into the greenwood. The travellers clamoured for her protection but she was inflexible. "Nay, it may not be. Have business in the west. Yet will we escort you to Middehurst. Must make your own arrangements there" and with that they had to be content.

Beyond Peteresfeld occurred the wilderness known as the New Forest through which they travelled at some speed. They had crossed the Itchen, making for Romesy, when they were stopped by a body of men, led by a heavily armoured man. From his arms it was apparent he was a gentleman; nonetheless, Lady Margaret knew she was face to face with a predator. It was a local landowner who tried to exact dues for their passage across his land. They were riding the king's highway and Meg laughed in his face. Knowing her to be a woman, he started to play the bully. "'Tis this way, lady. You pay the dues, or life ends here. Think on't. No more whoring, no more.....".

Meg's hand itched but she laughed lightly. "Say you so, sir? I fear me you brag too much to be a fighting man. This is the way of it. The money you seek is in my pouch. Yet you reach it over my body".

His men were grinning, yet she knew they were no match for her fellows. She was inordinately proud of them, all seasoned in arms. Then battle was joined, and the last sound Meg heard before steel clashed with steel was Kate's gurgle of delight. Yet it was really nothing and lasted but five minutes. The men fled and their leader rolled in the road. Meg stared down at him amusedly. He was not hurt, merely dazed by her blow that had knocked him from the high saddle.

"Sir" she murmured, with her customary politeness, "it seems there are only two ways of settling this matter. Either you mount your horse and we settle our quarrel as members of the nobility should. Or you void the field like a craven knave".

She could not believe that any gentleman, with blood in his veins, would fail to meet her challenge. Yet he mounted his horse without a word, and cantered off with the jeers of the Boxhull men in his ears. Meg blinked and wordlessly returned her sword to its scabbard.

Cralle snorted disparagement. "You were too kind to him, Meg. Should have slain him out of hand".

"It may be I shall have to".

"How mean you?".

Meg peered at her through the slit of her bascinet, surprised. "Come now, Kate, be not as slow-witted as Knelle! You know well that a man cannot take that from a lady".

"Ah!".

"And when he hits us again, lead you our men against his. And let not one escape. 'Twill be my life he seeks and 'tis I who must fight, kill him. Or he me".

It was less than a league further on in their road when the enemy appeared, crashing through the gorse. "We are outnumbered" Meg announced, fretfully.

"How delightful" Cralle murmured, unhesitatingly putting herself at the head of the Glottingham men. "But look to yourself, Meg. He carries a mace".

"Well, so do I, Kate". Whatever Lady Margaret was, she was no coward. She spurred to meet her enemy, hefting her mace as she did so. Meg had intended to settle the man as she had the Pelham sprig; but she missed. So did he, as she swayed in the saddle, like the old hand she was. They wheeled their horses and attacked again. This time both connected. His mace clanged against the side of her bascinet, low down where it shielded the neck. Hers hit his shoulder, near the neck. He grunted, sagging in the saddle for a moment under the force of her blow. Then he swung at her again and she at him. The two maces met in mid-air and the shock of the meeting jarred her arm right up to the shoulder. Then he swung again with ferocity and seeing it coming, she jerked her head back.

The mace struck her a glancing blow at the top of her visor. Lady Margaret was no stranger to the risks of combat; it was what added the zest to her life. Yet his blow, had it landed fully where he intended, would have settled her account fully. As it was, there were flashes of light in front of her eyes and sickness hit her like a cyclone. It seemed to her as if her nose exploded. She cried out in pain that was terrible, her head forced backwards; she groaned distressfully, mouth open, eyes staring trying to pierce the flashing lights that danced before them. Her nose gushed blood, which sprayed out, trickling through the ventilation holes and spreading over the smooth steel of the snout of her bascinet. He roared his triumph, striking her again and yet again. She moaned, rigid in the saddle, incapable of defence; it seemed as if she floated in a sea of nausea. And because her mouth was open, she felt hot, sweet blood trickling into it, and coursing down her throat. She choked, and choking jerked upright into another crucifying blow to the head, happily at the top of her bascinet.

Then, to spare herself further punishment, she reared her horse. It was purely automatic, part of her father's training, dredged up from the darkening halls of her mind. Laying back as she was she invited, and received, a crushing blow to the breastplate. She cried out. From afar off she heard his shout: "Die, bitch, die!". Maybe it was that, or maybe the fear of death, which they say concentrates the mind wonderfully, that caused her mind to clear. But she struck out as hard as she was able; her mace struck the protruding snout of his bascinet just where it rises from the visor. It smashed his head to the right, giving her time to get upright again. That one success brought her control of her body again, and she smote him crushingly, just above the pivot of his visor.

He uttered a cry like a wild boar, struck by a crossbow bolt and dropped. She knew he was dead before he left the saddle; her blow had shattered his skull. He fell onto his right side, then slowly sank on to his face. She had no remorse; how could she? He had been trying to destroy her. She only thanked the saints she had managed to do it. That is, before he had done it to her. Yet she knew how close it had been, and how much she owed to the steel in which she was encased.

Sitting there, hands on the pommel of her saddle, feeling ill, blood dripping from her bascinet, she thought of her kind, of her class to which she was proud to belong. From birth their men were taught to fight and destroy; it was a way of life. Gentlemen loved to fight, it was the way they justified their existence and their manhood. She too, and Kate, and Bess, and dear Ursula had loved it too; but they were amazons, warrior ladies she thought proudly. Ay, people of her rank carried the honour of England on their sword points; she was of the nobility and did her part. Her men fought and died for her reasons, not for their own. For herself, Lady Margaret was happy when trading blow for blow. And this was as it should be for if ladies wished to live like men and have freedom, they had to fight too. Ay, and to die too, that was understood.

She raised her head painfully and looked around her, seeing the bitter battle going on amid the gorse. Kate was hacking men to their deaths like a veteran. She too, Meg thought with twitching lips, was a born fighter; she loved it. What a mercenary she would have made. No pity, just cruelty, a killing machine. But her men were having a bad time, so was Kate, taking much punishment. Meg was bleeding, in pain, but she knew she had to assist, although her whole body wanted no more than to lay on the ground and recover from her hurts. Yet she was their captain, it was her place..... she touched her horse with her long spurs.

Her violent arrival turned the tide. Even as she plunged into the fight she saw Kate's sword cleave a skull and the men disappear, screaming, beneath horses hooves. There was a short period of carnage, then the enemy broke. They had nowhere to run, yet they ran; and Kate, vengeful as ever, pursued them, hacking and cutting. Gurgling screams echoed around Meg's bascinet as the men died amid the gorse bushes. Meg let it happen; Kate needed her pleasure. It was like laying on a river bank, spearing fish, no risk at all.

When she thought it had gone on long enough, Meg spurred to Wenham's side: "Sound the tucket for recall". Wenham did so, and Kate reluctantly wheeled her horse, galloping to her side.

"Why, Meg" she remarked, breathing hard, "you are hurt".

"Ay, hurt and battered. But 'tis really only a nosebleed. Might have been worse, but 'twas not". She started counting her men. She had started with thirty and now only twenty-four remained. Wenham started congratulating her on her survival but she cut him short. "Six of our comrades are slain, Thomas?"

"Ay, my lady, six all slain".

"'Tis pity, Thomas. We can do no more than leave them where they fell, poor wretches. Too far from home to do aught else".

"Ay, my lady. They are soldiers and expect naught else. But did your ladyship have much trouble with the knight?"

"You see mine harness, this my blood".

"It was hard then, Meg" Kate suggested, softly.

"Ay, 'twas hard. Yet he lies dead; and I live".

"Art sure he is dead?"

"With his skull broken, no man rises".

"True. It seems a good harness".

"We have not the time, Kate. And you have three harnesses. You need not a fourth".

Cralle laughed. "That is very true".

"So let us all proceed on our journey. We have wasted too much time on these carrion".

"Yet to see you so blooded distresses me, Meg. I pray you let me clean your bascinet".

"You have a kerchief?" came Meg's dry enquiry. "In your bascinet, mayhap. Or your gauntlet".

"Nay, but Master Wenham" - she turned to her squire - "there are enough dead and to spare. Rip me a shirt from one of the dogs".

This was done and she cleaned her friend's armour with loving care. "And your face, your dear face?"

"It must wait until we reach Bryanston. The flow has ceased and is drying. It must wait, I tell you. Let us on".

And they rode without a backward glance. Familiarity with sudden death had dulled sensibilities, and the code by which they lived had brutalised their spirit.

"Most enjoyable" murmured Kate as they rode.

"Most" Meg agreed, "and it happens all too frequently. One can understand well enough the runaway serf or peasant attacking his betters. Here jealousy and greed are the cause. But that a man of gentle birth should prey on his kind is scandal indeed. Yet it occurs often, dearest Kate. In the county of Leicester, now, six knightly brothers named Folville, in Edward III's time were responsible for many heinous crimes, including the murder on the public highway of a baron of the Exchequer, one Roger Bellers. Just as that man" - she jerked a steel thumb behind her - "tried to slay me. And would unquestionably have slain you also, had I fallen. Not only this, but these same Folvilles held to ransom a justice of the king's bench, named Sir Richard Willoughby. Then there have been other lordly rascals like Sir Robert Holland and Sir Adam Banstre in Lancashire who did similar crimes. The Folvilles were brought to book, but I know not whether the other gentlemen were. Ay, the land is lawless and this is why we have to go armed to the teeth, we the nobility. Yet that we should be in danger from our own kind, why, that is quite monstrous".

Kate nodded in agreement. "So did you well to rid the world of yon fellow".

"Doubtless. Yet like you with the fellow in Norfolk, 'twas not easy. Was much stricken".

"Such is the excitement in combat. Someone has to die. Must not complain, Meg. When you triumph, a nosebleed is no bad payment. If you triumph not, then 'tis no matter!".

Instead of trying to answer the unanswerable, an amused Meg remarked: "The day is much spent. Yon affray has wasted much time. I had proposed to press on, but I am very greatly wearied and we will stay at the nunnery of the Benedictines at Romsey. 'Tis a large house; the last occasion I visited, there were eighty nuns. Ay, we will do that".

When, in a little over an hour, they had been shown to a sparse furnished chamber, Meg sank exhausted on to her bed. Kate bade her sit as she was, and fiddled with the fastening of the bever. Once removed she lifted Lady Margaret's bascinet and stepped back, blanching a little. "Meg.....your face!".

"Ay, a mess is it not?"

"Somewhat of a mess". Kate went to the door and called for water, warm, and wine in that order. Returning she expeditiously unbuckled her friend's armour at a speed that would have prompted a squire's admiration. And Meg let her, because she was much wearied, and 'twas her due and to be ministered to by the lady she loved was a joy of the utmost purity. And then she did the same for Kate, though slower, and more clumsily, for it appeared to her that she had much difficulty in concentrating, so sapped was her energy.

"Is there a reflective glass, Kate".

"Now you know well that a nun considers such an article of vanity".

"Hmm! Then must you describe my face to me".

"Why, you are clarted with dried blood, Meg, as you might expect. Your mouth, your chin, your neck and, ay" - she unlaced the padded leather suit and peered at the valley between the opulent bosoms - "the blood has trickled far. But no matter. Off with the tunic and I will cleanse you, and count it an honour to be your handmaiden". Meg smiled wanly and lifted her arms so that the garment could be drawn from her.

"And my nose, Kate, my poor nose?"

"It sits fair where it did. Yet the skin has been broken, I do admit. And where is that damned water?"

Even as she spoke there was a discreet tap at the door and a novice nun staggered in with a bucket of water and set it down gratefully. She boggled at the sight of Meg's face and departed. "And forget not the flask of wine" Meg threw at her, and the young lady intimated that it would be brought.

As Cralle gently cleaned her face and body Meg lay still, quite happily. "We shall have to sleep in our suits of mail, Kate. We have no wagons; and no wagons means no change of raiment for us, ladies though we be".

"An inconvenience, no more".

"Is there blood inside my tunic?"

"Nay, the blood adhered much to the skin and did not soil your garment. I have looked" she explained. "Now, Meg, I must approach your nose, as gently as may be". Yet Meg winced, and was at once ashamed of herself. "A small matter".

"Truly, not as bad as a sword in the body, or an arrow in the carcase. Yet must it have pained you. I mind well when I was a maid and a boy smote me hard on my nose. Tears started from mine eyes, and blood from my nose; and I felt mighty sick, as did you".

"A worthy young man to so strike a maiden! What did you do?"

"I smote him on the sharpness of the jaw and he laid down in a stupor". She laughed ruefully. "Yet was I well chastised for it by mine father who stated it was not the place of wenches to strike men. Yet I determined within myself that even as men sowed, so should they reap".

"Bravo, kitten!"

The wine came and they drank to each other, then slept the sleep of the just.

In the morning they left and after passing through the town of Wimborne, arrived at Bryanston without further molestation. Margaret found the manor in fair shape. This was apparent after poring over estate records and she pronounced herself satisfied. The steward, Master Henry Chideock, bowed low, promising that all would be well when Sir Alan came of age in August 1390. He further stated that he had ordered a fire lit in the large chamber and a new bed prepared for the other lady.

"Mistress de Cralle will sleep with me" she stated, sharply and the man bowed. "Now, Master Chideock, in your last letter to me you spoke of troubles, but did not specify. Discuss unto me".

"Your ladyship knows better than I the lawless nature of this realm and the wicked men who ride free, stealing, robbing, burning, and committing a great catalogue of heinous crimes. In the part of the realm where we now are, we suffer greatly from men who hide for the most part in Cranborne Chase, from which they venture forth under cover of night to carry out divers deeds like burning cots, driving off cattle, and the like".

"And what has been done?"

"What could be done, your ladyship. Local landowners gathered together a body of men and rode into the Chase after these rogues. As your representative, I thought it proper to contribute such men as I could spare. Yet the miscreants remain at large, for they seem to vanish like the morning mist, returning in the night to do more damage, to steal more cattle and sheep, and to commit other crimes about which I do not speak". She understood very well. "And this manor, being untenanted, has been many times the subject of attention. Since the last time, and the people clamouring for protection, I thought it meet that I have all animals driven into the manor courtyard each night. And to give refuge to the people, who are much affeared. Since when they have left us alone, praise be to God".

Meg smiled. "You have done very well, Master Henry. Sir Alan becomes of age next year, at which time your troubles will be over".

"'Tis so to be hoped, lady. For I am no fighting man; better with a quill than a sword".

"Like as not". Meg smiled. "This may be the last time I shall come this way. Would wish to thank you for your good service during my son's minority". Henry Chideock bowed. "I shall be leaving on the morrow. As a last service, see that all is in readiness for an early departure".

"All shall be ready, lady. And yet, if I may in any way prevail, may I advise that you return to Sussex by way of Salisbury and Winchester? 'Tis a longer way, and will indeed take you through Cranborne Chase. Yet, Mistress de Cralle has related the great trouble you encountered in your road to Bryanston. From Salisbury your way lies over open downland. I am no soldier but your force is quite small. Another attack would see the end of you. In the forests you are vulnerable. On open downland, can see a long way. 'Twould be safer lady".

"Am not sure that another attack would see the end of us, Master Chideock" she smiled, "but I take your advice kindly. You are doubtless right and I will follow the advice. And I thank you for it".

"And think" mused Kate, when Meg told her of the decision, "of the noble feats of arms that may be achieved in the Chase. Master Henry tells me there is a notorious band of brigands.....".

"Kate". Meg was smiling, yet firm. "We shall pass through the Chase with all convenient speed and reach Salisbury. Your knight errantry will be the death of you. Also myself, and I am not careful. We go that way for security. Master Henry is a sensible man and speaks sooth. We have lost six men and are too few to go seeking adventures. No sword play, unless we be attacked on the road. Now quell that quarrelsome spirit of thine and come you to bed". Kate pouted adorably, using her blue eyes to great effect; and Meg laughed. "Remember we ride early in the morn, so no play. One more measure of Rhenish and then to sleep".

Kate snuggled up to her, whispering in her ear: "Have never seen Salisbury or the henge of stone nigh unto it. Could we at least see it?". Meg could find no valid reason for not doing so.

So in the morning they rode north-east, passing through the Chase without trouble. It was a lonely road, and to some extent still is. There was only one hindrance when Wenham's horse cast a shoe and this had to be renewed at Tarrant Hinton. Then it started to drizzle; but they passed out of it. Margaret pointed far ahead to where a tall spire was plainly visible. "Salisbury" she stated in some relief, and so it proved. Well before dark they rode through the gate and into the famous town.

After a night's lodging, and with Wenham in attendance, they rode to view the henge, marvelling, as visitors still do, at the size of the stones. They stared curiously at Old Sarum likewise, already in their day much decayed. The cathedral had been taken down in 1331, and the castle was already falling into ruin as men's works will, when unattended. The houses were roofless for the most part, but the ditch that surrounded the town was still deep and formidable. Then to view the cathedral, while Wenham gathered the men together.

Their way then lay over open downland to Winchester. Wenham eyed the desolation with disfavour, but he had no good reason for doing so. Nobody could approach them without their knowing of it long before, and this was what Lady Margaret sought. She mentally thanked God for Master Chidiok's good sense, knowing her depleted force had little chance of surviving a determined attack. Her fellows were good and would die for her, yet she had no wish to put them to the test without cause. Already she had caught the occasional grumble at travelling in "furrin' parts", a typical Sussex man's reaction that would last far beyond her time. So she pressed on, and was mighty happy to see Winchester looming up through the dusk. She and Kate lodged at the large Benedictine nunnery. This, like Rusper, was a school for the daughters of lords and gentlemen, and they found themselves welcomed. It was very pleasant to find themselves in female company again after so long in the saddle. But unlike Rusper, this house was very well administered and disciplined. It was in the smaller houses that laxity was met with. In some of these the refectory was totally abandoned and the nuns had feasts in their rooms, and often wandered abroad, causing great scandal. Some even had children but these were in a minority.

On the morrow they rode on across the county of Southampton, entering Sussex in the afternoon, and lodged that night at Easebourne, a house of the Augustinian nuns, where the Prioress, one Margaret Wyvile, received them personally and made them welcome, tending to their needs herself. When Kate mentioned Rusper, the Prioress's nose wrinkled in disparagement. Yet it was obvious

that her house was no different than Rusper. She herself dressed luxuriously, and the nuns were lax, and the young ladies residing there totally uncontrolled. Margaret allowed herself to be shocked, whereat Kate laughed.

"That was how Ursula must have been" Kate responded, stretching naked on the bed, "'tis great happiness being a lady".

Meg dissolved immediately, sinking helplessly on to the bed and delivering herself with abandon to Kate's ministrations.

"And bethink you, my dear one, to our joy we lay with Joanna on the morrow". She smiled triumphantly, as Meg gave a shuddering moan. "And we shall make the sweetest love".

Thus, on the morrow they rode for Rusper with some eagerness, stimulated by their gallantry of the previous night. It took them all day to reach the nunnery, for it was high up in Sussex, on the Surrey boundary. Yet anticipation kept them happy all day, and when they reached the house, in failing light, they were received with soft, feminine cooing that was quite delightful to their ears after hours in the saddle.

With the coming of dawn Lady Margaret found her mind much exercised by the matter of Pelham. After breakfast in their chamber, Meg seemed little anxious to depart, exercised more by the delights of having Joanna on one knee and Kate on the other. One thing was patent. Meg was erring on the side of caution as regards the Pelhams, which Cralle thought was a pity. She would dearly have liked another bite at that particular cherry. Her sword arm was strong and she saw no reason to avoid conflict if the Good Lord presented it. Meg obviously had other ideas.

Then came a nun, bearing a message from Wenham, borne by the gatekeeper to the Prioress. The men camping outside the walls sought instructions as to their departure. Meg smiled. Thomas Wenham was getting a mite restive. "Pray advise Master Wenham that I purpose to depart one hour after midday. Our mounts should be ready at that time".

The two ladies armed each other, allowing Wenham to check their security when they emerged. He grudgingly admitted that it had been well done. They swung to the saddle.

Conditions, when they reached Buckstede, could not have been better. A thick autumnal fog hung over the ridgeway. It was dark for although the moon could be dimly seen, it yielded little light to illumine their way. It was the harbinger of winter. The contention of the previous occasion was conspicuously absent, for which Lady Margaret was truly thankful. A steel cap in a ditch was the only reminder of what had been done at the three-went way.

It was near enough ten at night when they rode into Glottingham. They climbed stiffly from the saddle, yawning from very weariness; yet Meg summoned up a smile for Kate: "Our last venture this year".

Gloomily, Cralle acknowledged it: "Ay, our last, with a pox on it! Nor is there aught to look forward to till the spring. Not counting Christmas".

"'Tis true. There is always Christmas" was her laughing rejoinder. But she understood very well what Cralle was saying and reflected that it was true what men said - that the appetite grows by what it feeds on.

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RAPPROCHEMENT

It was in April, 1390, that a messenger came from the Abbot of Battle, John Crane. As a result of this letter, an uneasy and fragile peace was established between Boxhull and Pelham. Lady Margaret did not sue, nor did Pelham. Yet the Abbot of Battle, who had relations with both houses, urged this course greatly.

Margaret broke the seal and read the letter; then she called the messenger before her. "Pray advise the Abbot that I will attend this meeting, on the appointed day and at the due time. Convey my thanks for his good offices".

Kate was dubious. "Mayhap 'tis a trap".

"With the Abbot holding a candle while I am done to death?" she smiled. "I think not. You must learn to trust people. Yet shall I go well protected, rest assured. As indeed must you". She became a little dreamy, then smiled: "Moreover, 'twill be the ideal time to wear those new bascinets which we have not yet worn and are still glossy new".

This pleased Kate Cralle mightily. "Ay, 'tis a goodly thing to impress one's enemies with one's state and wealth". Meg laughed, and laughing, kissed her full on the mouth.

Yet Kate was reluctant that Meg should go to the meeting on her own but the Abbot was insistent that she and Pelham should leave their men at the town edge and ride, with only their squires in attendance, to the abbey.

So one coolish morning in early May they rode. Both ladies were a mass of steel, feeling mighty proud of their brass trimmed bascinets. This was necessary, for they trusted Pelham not a whit; but when Kate, at the edge of town, saw her ride off with Knelle in attendance, she was greatly disquieted. Meg had left her in command and she asked nothing more than to ride to the rescue.

In those days the forest pressed close to Battle and the two tracks - one from the west, one from the north - joined to make one, just before merging with the London road over Caldbec Hill. Yet the Boxhull men and the Pelham men could plainly see each other through the trees. Their mutual hostility was patent, for soldiers assumed the attitudes of their leaders. Or as Meg was often heard to remark: "My men die for my reasons, not their own". It was true enough. If they were told that such a person was an enemy, that was enough. A man-at-arms fought for the person who paid him, and made no private judgement as to rights and wrongs. And as the Boxhull men worshipped their captain they were all the more ready to fight and die for her.

On this morning then, Lady Margaret stood in the abbot's chamber, facing the man who had sought her life, across the abbot's table. Both were armed to the teeth, the abbot noted, trusting the other not at all. She, haughty and arrogant, had her left hand on her sword. He, smouldering and resentful, groped longingly for his dagger. Margaret de Boxhull was taller by a head and made full use of those inches, a very grand lady indeed the abbot thought, oozing bellicosity from every pore.

"'Tis wrong" the abbot started, after a nervous cough, "for two great houses to be so much at variance".

Without taking her eyes from Pelham, the lady nodded coolly. "'Tis so, Abbot. Yet the fault is not mine".

"Not thine.....!". Pelham took a step back, jaw jutting, masculine aggression personified.

"Nay, not mine".

"You slew my people".

"With total justice. They had abused my people, raped women, burned cots.....".

"They were in their cups!".

"'Tis no excuse, sir". Her voice, chilly and distant, sliced through his rage.

"Nor is it indeed" the abbot opined hesitantly, beginning to doubt the wisdom of the meeting. "We must allow Lady Margaret has justice there".

"And you slew, God knows how, thirty of my men, my nephew and rendered a friend a helpless cripple".

"With great joy, sir. You omit to tell Father Abbot that you sent those men to do me to death, and all those who rode with me. It was open war and I was fighting for life. Was I to permit myself to be spitted like a lark?".

This was but charge and counter-charge but it was obvious to the Abbot that she had much cause for complaint. These noble families were like mastiffs, trained from birth to fight and kill, the monk thought. His eyes flickered upwards. Seeing her standing there, cold and impervious to Pelham's wrath, as a man he had to admire her. Yet, as a priest he disapproved of her mightily; and her perversions with the woman Cralle sickened him.

"What seek you, Lady Margaret?".

For the first time almost she dropped her eyes to the monk. "An end to the strife, and free passage to the west. I need to ride that way to oversee other of mine estates and, till he comes of age in August, my son's in Dorset. And I want not for me and mine to be the victim of this man's malice".

Pelham was heard to choke on his bile. He wished he could strike the bitch dead. The memory of his nephew's crushed jaw haunted him, as did Colbrond's twisted and wasting body. The knowledge that he was ultimately responsible for their fate did not lessen his ire.

The Abbot coughed. "That has the sound of reason, Lady Margaret. If this is granted you, will you order your men not to attack Pelham men on their meeting?".

"Ay, if he" - she nodded curtly in Pelham's direction - "does the same".

Thomas Crane tore his eyes from the part of her face visible to him by reason of her raised visor. He thought how handsome it was, and as swift as that thought was, something leapt between his legs. "What say you, sir?". This to Pelham.

Pelham was silent for a Paternoster-while, growing redder by the second. Was she not so formidable, were she not so powerful, of such ancient lineage, her state not so great, he would have stormed her castle and burned it around her ears. He was unrepentant in his hatred. His dead nephew cried out from the tomb for vengeance against the bitch; yet the one man who had lived for some hours before succumbing to his wounds, had sworn it had been a fair fight. But a woman! That was what rankled. Yet here he was, backed into a corner.

"'Tis agreed" he grated. "Will never be friendship but a peace will be, however uneasy".

Her smile, warm as winter sunshine, accompanied agreement. "I ask no more than that".

The Abbot relaxed, much relieved. "Then will you swear on this mine crucifix to keep the terms of the agreement".

Without a word Lady Margaret removed her right gauntlet and set her bejewelled hand to the cross and swore. Thomas Crane could not help noticing that the fingers, though strong, were smooth and white. "I so do swear". Then Pelham's stubby hand descended on the cross, and he likewise swore.

"'Tis well" nodded the cleric. "Then will you share this wine with me. Then will you go your ways and strive no more against the other's house".

And it was so.

Thomas Crane accompanied them down the stairs, fearing that had they followed each other down on their own, the temptation of advantage would have proved too much. At the stair foot, they went their ways.

Outside they mounted their horses in complete silence, then rode, not speaking, from the abbey gate. It was only where the roads diverged did they unbend sufficiently to salute each other in cavalier fashion.

"High-bellied bitch!" muttered Pelham to himself.

"Detestable upstart!" Margaret thought.

Kate was naturally full of questions but she was cut short. "Not now, Kate".

Lady Margaret raised her hand and rode.

Back at Glottingham she addressed her men, and from that day forth hostility ceased, at least openly.

"And now, Kate" Margaret said, placing hands on her shoulders, "I can go on our travels with a happy heart".

HIC JACET MARGARETA DE BOXHULL

The year 1399 was a bad year for England, and for Sussex, and indeed for Lady Margaret. For in this year she would die.

It was a nasty winter; the snow started on the day before Christmas and lasted well into February, at which time there was a great storm of rain and hail that almost overnight cleared the snow, turning the rivers into torrents. At Echyngham, Bess was marooned for a week as the flood waters of the river Rother lapped around her walls. Flooding was nothing new to her. The river tended to do this every year but this was the worst she could remember.

What troubled Bess was that she was prevented from visiting her sister at Glottingham. For this was 1399, Meg's moment of truth; and she wanted to be with her all she could. She loved her very dearly, did Bess, and greatly admired the courage with which she faced the future. At Christmas she had turned it off with a laugh but Bess knew how much she was affected. No mortal should have to carry out this kind of knowledge. She hoped that when her time came, death would come suddenly.

It was sad, too, that she was suffering the advance of age. It was a common enough feature of life, rheumatics; but seeing Meg's swollen ankle and painful thumb, she had been troubled, for the thumb was on her right hand, her sword hand. It was strange that Meg should suffer it, and not she; for Meg had lived on her hill-top for many years, whereas she, Bess, had lived in the valley bottom all her life, surrounded by fog and dampness. If anyone should have had rheumatism, it should have been Bess. Yet 'twas not so. Nor did Bess like her sister's half jocular, half fatalistic remark that it would be better if she was killed, before the winter came. It seemed that she viewed the onset of winter with dread. Bess sighed and shook her head with foreboding.

At Glottingham on the first Monday in March, John Knelle woke Meg to tell her that a young gentleman was without, requesting a passage of arms with her for the honour of his lady. Even her brave heart fluttered, and she felt the colour drain from her face. Was this the day? Her day to die? She looked around her, almost fearfully. Ursula had said she would return on the day of her death but as she looked around her bedchamber she saw nothing untoward. Recovering somewhat, she forced a smile.

"What manner of man, John?".

"One who gives his name as Devenish, my lady".

"Well equipped?".

He grinned. "As well as a man who has even now left the armourer's shop".

Lady Margaret laughed and he with her. "A young man, as I would judge".

"Passing young, without trace of beard, doubtless with his mother's milk still in him".

"So young? And yet man enough to challenge me!".

"Ay, but if I might in any way prevail, I would request your ladyship to be generous. A crossing of swords merely, no axe, no flail. 'Tis not serious business".

"You are mighty kind-hearted this morning, John" she grumbled.

"Combat is combat. Must take his chances".

"And yet, your ladyship being so expert.....".

"Fret not, John. Will let the lad down lightly".

As he armed her, he looked at her with some seriousness. "Had I a son, would have wished him to be like that lad. Our hope for the future, my lady. Faith" he laughed, "when he spoke of his lady he verily blushed. A girlish youth, but brave".

So Lady Margaret found him indeed and her heart went out to him. It was something unseemly, their meeting. She, a lady of some forty summers and he a youth of eighteen or thereabouts. It was not equal.

They exchanged courtesies, he praising her valour, she his courage in adventuring his person for his lady. Then they fought. If it could be termed a fight. She allowed him to belabour her body, without once making any attempt to seriously scar his harness, which still carried the bloom of newness. Then she determined to terminate the affair by hitting his sharply, but not fiercely, on his wrist, protected by the long steel gauntlet.

His sword flew from his hand. Meg smiled to herself, as she presented her sword to his throat. "Sir," she murmured, "I beg you now to yield to my mercy, for your own sake and for that of your lady. Lacking this, I must take your life".

She gave him many minutes to reflect for she knew that his manhood was at stake and that he must not be seen to yield too quickly. But yield he did.

"'Tis well" she nodded, scabbarding her sword. "It has been a privilege for me to cross swords with so valiant a gentleman".

The boy - for he was no more - responded in his own fashion, which was fulsomely flattering.

She watched him ride off with his squire rather sadly. He was at the beginning of his life, she at the end of hers. For she knew, or thought she knew, her fate, for this was the fourteenth century and the era of the belief in omens, signs, portents and apparitions. As she turned her horse she could not resist the thought that her next adversary would not be disposed of so simply, if at all.

But she had little time to think about her own doom, and perhaps this was just as well for her sanity's sake. The countryside was greatly disturbed, and in July Lady Joan Pelham (she was Sir John's second wife, the widow of Sir Hugh Zouche and a Bramshott by birth) was besieged in Pevensey Castle by the men of Surrey and Sussex, and a fair contingent of men of Kent. During this month neither Lady Margaret, or Bess, or Kate Cralle, felt it safe often to shed their armour.

Like many others of the lesser nobility, they came to curse their king, Richard II, for from him stemmed their troubles.

The promise of his youth, when in 1381 he had faced Wat Tyler at Blackheath, had not been maintained. By 1399 he had become a tyrant. In the two years 1397-9 the king had deprived men of their property and driven them into exile by arbitrary act (pre-eminently Henry, Duke of Lancaster, son of John of Gaunt who had died in February); he had tampered with the course of justice to have enemies condemned as traitors; he had imprisoned men without trial and denied them access to the courts of law; he had exacted unprecedented oaths and unparliamentary taxes; and made use of a private army to terrorise his subjects. These enormities turned the bulk of the ruling class against him. For, they argued not unreasonably, if he could act as he had against the Duke of Lancaster, what prevented him from acting in an even harsher manner towards lesser members of the nobility?

Henry of Lancaster, taking advantage of the king's absence in Ireland, returned to England to claim his estates. Originally he had made landfall at Pevensey, but he was persuaded to sail on around the coast nearer to his own powerbase in the north, landing at Ravenspur on the 4th July.

Both sisters supported Henry's rights and were by that token Lancastrians. Unpalatable as it was to Lady Margaret, this forced her into the same camp as Sir John Pelham. Since she had little time for him, the situation was embarrassing; but the fact was clear that, politically at least, they were on the same side. For Pelham was Constable of Pevensey, an important, not to say vital post. And he was a friend and supporter of Henry, Duke of Lancaster. It was for this reason that the king's supporters had besieged Lady Joan in her home; and it was in defence of Lancaster's rights that when invited to send men to support the king, the sisters affected prodigious deafness.

But all the alarms came to nothing. Sussex at least remained relatively peaceful. The days of August were long and sunny, and the three ladies felt secure enough to have picnics within sight of the castle, amply protected by men-at-arms. It was an interlude of happiness vouchsafed to Lady Margaret before eternal night gathered around her. Even she, as happy day followed another, managed to push her fears to the back of her mind, if not forget them altogether. But in her quiet moments, when alone and without Kate's laughter to divert her, the apprehensions came flooding back. Yet it was not fear of death so much as fear of the unknown. It was not the fact of her doom that chilled her, but the foreknowledge of it, and the ignorance of the day. This was the incubus that weighed her down. Death in combat worried her not a whit; this was an occupational hazard with which she had long since come to terms. She knew well how a man sentenced to be executed, but without a day being set aside for the deed, must feel.

August gave way to September and Lady Margaret became frantic. Even her brave spirit found it difficult to face the uncertainty. In these circumstances she found a great need of Kate Cralle; that she turned to Cralle rather than Knelle says much of her essential nature. Kate allowed herself to disbelieve in the apparition: "'Twill not happen, Meg. Mayhap you dreamt it".

Meg smiled sadly: "Would that it were so, Kate". Yet she allowed herself to hope, as day followed day.

Then, on 13th October, 1399, while it was yet dark, she woke. Beside her, Kate's regular breathing forced itself on her consciousness. How long she had laid there she was uncertain, but suddenly, from beneath closed lids, she saw a bright light. Open her eyes she watched it in astonishment and fear. It was in the corner of the bedchamber and was growing suddenly larger, she saw; and she was terrified. For she knew what it betokened. The light slowly formed itself into human form and to her eyes at least it assumed the unmistakeable shape of Ursula de Ukkefeld. The apparition seemed to look upon her sadly, then faded quite away.

Lady Margaret lay where she was for some time, staring at the spot where the light had been. After the long months of strain, she felt quite relaxed, all fear sliding from her. The certainty of her death this day feared her not; she had faced extinction so often in her life, that death had achieved the status of an old friend. What had Bennet Haselden once said? "A sword in the gut is a fitting end for a soldier". And she was a soldier, too, she thought proudly. No, death was a small matter. Since it must

be, she welcomed it. She remembered Haselden's death from dysentery and shivered slightly. Poor devil, she thought. To die so horribly, so far from the scenes he loved, in a foreign land. She at least would fall on her own land and be interred in native clay.

As the first light of dawn slid over the horizon she rose quietly, so as not to wake Kate, and washed her face. By the time Cralle woke, Meg was in mail and sitting by the dead fire.

Kate stared sleepily for a moment, yawning; then comprehension dawned. Uttering a distressful cry she leapt from bed and ran to her friend: "Nay.....nay, it may not be!".

"'Tis today, Kate. It has come again".

Kate sank to her knees between her legs, entwining her arms around the body she loved, nestling her head against the unkind steel.

"You will triumph" she sobbed.

"Nay, Kate. Not this time".

"What will I do without you?".

"Nothing changes for you. 'Tis arranged. I have provided for your needs. You are a landed lady now. And Bess is much your friend".

"Bess is not you".

"'Tis true. But that cannot be mended".

"'Twould be best if I followed you".

Meg stroked the fair hair tenderly. "Think you I want to leave you, Kate? Our love? But you speak from the heart, sure?".

"Ay, you will see".

"Nay, 'tis but that you are much distressed".

"You will see". Her cry was wild, tearful.

"And how could you possibly come to me? You speak foolishly".

"I would buckle on mine armour and ride out alone until I met a knight on the road. I would block his path, or insult him. We would fight and I would be slain".

"With harness such as you have, 'twould not be easy, Kate". Meg was humorous. "Moreover, what you propose sounds much like suicide, expressly forbidden by the Church".

Kate moaned. "I would fight hard, as you have instructed me".

"Ay, you are a bonny fighter, Kate. We have had many adventures, you and I. When I am gone think of our life together. 'Twill bring you comfort. Think on't. Our love has been very sweet".

Jealously, Cralle whispered: "And now you go to Ursula. I know well that when you kissed me, you thought on her face".

"Nay, nay, Kate". Lady Margaret's voice was freighted with pain.

"'Twas so in the beginning, I do confess. Ursula has a place in my heart always. Yet, you cannot love an insubstantial ghost.

'Twas you I loved in very truth these many years, the glory of your hair, the beauty of your breasts, the softness of your flesh and your kisses that burn me yet". And when she answered not, but clung the tighter, Meg whispered: "And worry not, Kate. I will come to you, even as Ursula came to me. This I do swear".

There was silence for a long, long time, before Kate looked up at her: "What would you have me do this day? I could ride with you".

"And see me drop? 'Twould distress you. This is something only I may do. Nay, stay you within the castle. When they bear me in, all bloodied, it is you I would have do the last offices. Your gentle hands shall prepare me for the tomb. I would have no base hands on this mine body till I be shrouded".

Cralle groaned: "'Twill be as you say, Meg".

"And fear not, dear soul, I will be waiting for you. When your time comes I will be waiting for you with arms outstretched, never doubt it".

"And Ursula likewise?".

"And Ursula likewise. There are no earthly jealousies in Heaven, Kate".

"As I have heard".

"And mark me, Kate, never forget the light by which we have lived. The war against men goes on. You, too, will die in combat; I, Margaret de Boxhull, about to die see it, Kate. Until your last breath, keep the faith. Promise me now".

"I promise you, Meg. How can you doubt me?".

Cralle asked what she would have for breakfast. She said, a little bread and a measure of wine. Kate insisted on cheese likewise, for she said: "'Twill give you strength". Margaret nodded co-operatively and they sat together as the weak morning sun flooded into the chamber.

It was like twisting a knife in Cralle's belly, the knowledge that she would not sit with Meg again. She still only half believed that it would be so. True, Knelle had told her, fifteen years ago, of the apparition he had seen, and Meg had confided in her soon after. And now Meg told her of the light that had come in the small hours to warn her. It was not that she had not heard of such things but Cralle took refuge in the belief that such things happened to others, not to people one knew.

She could see that Meg was relaxed, unafraid. It made sense. Meg dreaded disease, that was all. No male thing ever made her appeared, since she considered herself the equal of all of them. And was, by all the Saints. There was no question of it. Had she not lived with her, ridden with her, for eighteen blessed years? Who knew better than Catherine de Cralle the quality of the lady she was proud to call her lover.

Meg, after breakfast, asked her to send John Knelle to her. He came, as always, promptly and when he asked her, which harness, she replied unhesitatingly, the bronze. For it appeared to her that if she was going to Ursula, it would be fitting to wear it. As he encased her in it she had a thought. "John" she murmured, "you mind the horse harness Mistress de Ukkefeld sported on that never to be forgotten day? It is still serviceable?".

"Ay, indeed, Lady Margaret". He was surprised. "I keep it even as a treasured relic. It bears yet a spot of her blood which I cannot remove. But what would you?".

"When my horse is saddled, see that the harness is fitted".

"Do we make war?" he grinned.

"Indulge me, John. A lady's whim".

She wished she could tell him but could not. It was not good that he should suffer. Until he had to, that is. She knew he loved her well and she loved him, after her fashion. He had served her well for many years and it would be scurvy recompense to unload her burden onto him. So she kept her counsel.

Then came the waiting, every moment she expected running footsteps to tell her that a man approached. But nothing stirred, and as the morning wore on, she began to feel slightly absurd. Knelle came once to say her horse was ready, and again about eleven asking when it was her intention to ride. To satisfy him she said she would ride at midday to take the air. And ride she did, waving to Kate on the west tower. She had been there all morning, searching the horizon for any sign of an approaching rider without result. The men at the gate saluted her and she raised her hand, acknowledging it. Had she been riding out to meet a challenge, they would have cheered her, as they always did. But on her last sortie, Lady Margaret was denied the cheers of encouragement that had always meant so much. And then she did a very odd thing, as Knelle was to recall. She stopped, and pulling her horse round, sat for as long as a man might tell a hundred, drinking in the home she loved and was now leaving for the last time. Knelle heard her deep sigh, almost distressed he thought; then she turned and started to descend the hill.

Taking the Rothersbridge road, they went slowly along the valley bottom where the peasants had fought so dourly many years before, until they reached the Lewes road, which the peasants called the Bishop's road, where they turned right, uphill, towards Rothersbridge. Yet, at the top of the hill, she turned right yet again, instead of descending into the place where she was still remembered unkindly because of her part in the revolt of 1381. So she climbed to the summit of the hill where the road flattened as it joined the Hastings to London road. Here occurred a fine view, for gazing to the west, over the woods, she could see her home rising formidably on its ridge. Further over yet, Brightling Hill blocked the view to the west. It was a goodly sight and it never failed to move her to pride. Then on to the London road, much wider, and up a further hill to St. John's Cross.

Here she stopped again and turned her horse to gaze down into the valley. From here she could see the spire of St. Martin's Abbey, and further over the church of Salehurst. And, on a very clear day, such as this, one could just see the tower of Sandhurst church, which was in Kent.

Knelle jarred into her thoughts. "A knight comes". She turned her horse and saw that it was so. He was riding from the coast towards London doubtless, with a squire. Had she not stopped to admire the view she would have missed him, for the road to Munfield turned off a few yards beyond the cross. Her heart thumped in her breast, half excitement, half apprehension that she knew so well before combat. For combat there would be, she knew. One cannot cheat destiny. It was here she was going to die. Automatically she pushed her pointed sabatons further into the stirrups. But she made, nonetheless, the attempt to take the Munfield road, but the approaching knight cried: "Hold!" recognising her arms from her jupon. The die was cast and Lady Margaret knew it.

He blocked her path and for the moment there was silence between them. Then she spoke angrily: "Make way, sir knight!".

He bore the arms of Despenser, with a baton of bastardy. It was an honour if she were to fall before a Despenser. Yet they supported the tyrant king and she supported the usurper, Henry of Lancaster. It was a confrontation indeed.

"Why, now" the man sneered, "if 'tis not the notorious traitor, Margaret de Boxhull".

She was slightly taken aback and felt herself flushing as the insult boomed at her from within his bascinet. "Are you mad? No traitor, I".

"Ay, a traitor, a gutless traitor who refused to take the field in support of her king".

"'Tis true I refused to take the field to support the tyrant, Richard of Bordeaux".

"Call you King Richard a tyrant, you craven whore" roared the man in fury.

"Ay, that do I, as do most honourable ladies and gentlemen".

"Then I call you a liar, you bastard of a faithless wife and a whoring father".

Knelle, watching Despenser's grinning squire with rage, wondered why Lady Margaret had not taken herself to her arms. Had not the man called her a traitor, a liar, and had he not misnamed both her mother and father.

"You scurvy, lousy knave" she snarled, furiously, "from which peasant hovel did you crawl to steal that harness?".

"Lancastrian bitch!" he bellowed. "You disgrace your spurs! I make war on all King Richard's enemies, and you will now die".

Her voice was harsh, as she flung defiance. "Braggart dog! The tomb yawns for you!".

She went for her axe and he for his mace; and spurring they attacked at once. Her arm whirled and the spike smashed through the mail of his armpit, while his mace struck her bascinet a glancing blow that made her blink. She had felt her spike touch his shoulder bone and had judged him crippled. They wheeled their horses. He had grunted as the spike went in and out, and even now blood ran from his fingers. They attacked again. Her axe smashed down on his shoulder; then, as she passed him, Knelle went cold. How the bastard did it, wounded as he was, he never knew; yet the mace described a wide semi-circle and iron struck bronze. Knelle could see the violence of the blow, for Lady Margaret's legs flew out at an unnatural angle as far as the stirrups would allow before crashing back onto the horse.

He knew she was slain, the bravest lady in all the world. What went on inside her bascinet he could well imagine. Blood would gush from her ears and nose, her mouth too, perhaps also her eyes. He had seen it happen. And yet she kept her saddle, swaying slightly. Where did the woman get her guts? She sat there, supported at back and front by the high saddle, sagging, right arm hanging limply, head bowed. She was obviously helpless.

Then, incredibly, her left arm pulled her horse round, and it was only then that Knelle saw that the steel of her helmet had not been broken open, merely dented, and yet blood glistened on her camail and dripped on to the backplate. A desperate sadness consumed him, yet he had known it would happen one day. As she had lived, so was she dying.

He would always believe that Lady Margaret turned her horse deliberately, seeking death. As her horse moved forward slowly he could see her sink forward towards her horse's neck, her feet leaving the stirrups. And when Despenser swung his mace vengeance, under its impact she fell limply to lay spreadeagled in the dust. For a second her right leg was upraised, then it sank slowly to the ground, her spur gouging a track in the dust.

"And so" shouted the man, "perish all traitors".

Despenser dismounted slowly. He knew the law of arms. He had the right, nay, the duty, to finish her and intended to do so. She had always been a brave woman, from what he had heard, and he grudgingly admired her quality.

Straddling her he raised the mace in both hands, for his right arm was virtually useless and pained him like all the torments of Hell. Then his resolve evaporated, for beneath him, from inside the bronze helmet, came an agonised whisper:-

"'Tis.....not worth the effort. Content you, sir.....the bitch is slain".

Despenser stared down with superstitious awe, slowly lowering his arm, and shuffling backward, dripping blood as he went. John Knelle, believing her dead, dismounted and came forward. But she was not quite slain. He heard her low moans, saw her hands clenching and unclenching. Kneeling by her, he placed his ear close to the snout of her visor, to hear any last message. At that moment her brain cleared and strength surged through her. She knew it was the harbinger of death, the long night. But her voice was strong when she spoke to him, as always thinking of him, even in her extremity:-

"Grieve not, John.....Ursula is here.....she smiles.....she beckons.....aaaaahh!".

The spirit left her and Knelle signed himself. It had not been a cry of pain but a long drawn out, gentle sigh, as a lady, greatly wearied, might emit when sinking down upon her bed. The bronze legs jerked twice and it was all over.

He rose and spoke in a strangely choking voice. "Sir, by the laws of chivalry you are entitled to that lady's harness, her arms, her horse, everything, and leave her naked where she lies. If so be as you can bring yourself to despoil so brave a lady of her honourable equipage".

Despenser grunted, and mounting his horse, sat staring at his hand, streaming blood. "Sir Squire" he rasped, "your mistress was a traitor to her king, and for many years a scandal to both her sex and to men. But I would never deny her to be the bravest and most warlike lady in all England. And to despoil her of her knightly trappings would go much against my conscience. Yet I take her horse. As to yon bitch, see her embalmed and presently committed to the earth".

Knelle watched the man and his squire ride away in triumph, before kneeling by the woman he had laid with, and prayed for her soul.

Her blood still dripped into the dust. He placed her arms by her side and straightened her legs. He looked around. He would need help, a cart or men with a hurdle. There was no help for it, he'd have to leave her where she was. It was not far to Munfield and young Hucksteppe had a cart and an old nag. He swung to the saddle and rode as he had rarely ridden before.

It took him a while to find the man, who was in the fields. He blanched. "But Master Knelle, 'tis not fitting for Lady Margaret. Have been cleaning out the hogs all morning, 'tis running wi'.....". Knelle swore. "You think she'll mind? Bring the cart. Can cut branches to cover it. Damn it man, hurry. Find me at the cross on the hill".

Spurring back the way he had come, he found her where she had fallen. A party of travellers had passed, like a pack of Levites, without even stopping. He could see their backs descending the hill. She was safe now. He couldn't bring himself to raise her visor. Yet he knew he'd have to, back at the castle. As her squire it was his function, his office, and he hated the thought of it. And Lady Elizabeth would have to be told.

As, in Sussex, his partisan died on a bald hilltop, in London Henry of Lancaster went to his crowning.

At the castle Knelle found horror and consternation. Most men wept openly for they had loved their Captain. And in those days men thought it no shame to weep. Many sank to their knees and prayed. Knelle chose four of Lady Margaret's favourite men-at-arms to bear her to what they called 'the stripping chamber' or 'the shambles', the small room next to the chapel. There they lay her on the bench or 'butcher's block' as it was known with ghoulis, soldierly humour. And indeed, it sometimes resembled a shambles.

He well remembered stripping Jane Alard's harness back in 1381 and then having her tossed unceremoniously in a corner of the stables, where she corrupted very quickly in that hot summer. Then there was Mistress Ursula; he shuddered even now when he remembered her terrible wound. Thank God he, John Knelle, had not been involved with that. Master Braban had been here then. He posted Harry Cruttenden at the door and went down to the courtyard.

He turned to Kate Cralle, who leaned against a wall, ashen-faced and staring. "Mistress" he said sharply, but also with some show of deference, for she was now a landed lady, "'tis meet that the Lady Elizabeth should be told. May I have permission to instruct your squire?". She nodded, dumbly. "Master Wenham, ride you to Echyngham, as if the Devil were at your heels, tell Lady Elizabeth what has befallen here, and beg her immediate attendance. I will tarry for her as long as I may, subject to the necessities of mine office".

As Wenham departed in haste, he turned to the men. "Now, lads, how comes these long faces? So your Captain has fallen. What then? There will be a new Captain, if my guess is right, the Lady Elizabeth. Neither she nor the Lady Margaret would like so much public grief. So go your ways; you all have duties to attend to. Attend to them. Not all the tears in the world will bring her back to us, although God knows I would wish it so ordered. Think on this - our beloved Captain is even now in Heaven with Mistress Ursula, who she loved dearly. Which one of you, in good conscience, would drag her back from happiness to this vale of tears?".

One by one they moved away until only he and Cralle were left. She touched his arm, smiling wanly. "I verily believe you loved her in truth, John Knelle".

"As you did, Mistress".

"Ay, as did I".

"And now she needs us once more. Come, Mistress".

Silently they ascended the stairs to do what had to be done.

A gruesome business now fell to John Knelle's lot. As squire his task was to remove his mistress's armour, even as it had been to arm her. Knowing her great pride in her rank and station, he approached his duty with reverence. Cralle stood by sobbing her heart out and it troubled him to hear it. He had never fully realised how one woman can love another.

The plate was unbuckled and laid aside. He worked from the feet up, little relishing the removal of the bascinet. Soon the mailed legs were revealed and he moved on to the plates that covered the hips and waist; then to the unpalatable task of breastplate and backplate. By the time he had done this, his hands were bloody. Cralle brought him wine and he drank deep. Then, with a sad heart, he turned to the final task.

As he reached this point, Elizabeth de Echyngham galloped into the courtyard, sprang from her horse and hurried up the stairs. Entering the chamber in her splendid Italian harness, she nodded to Knelle, her face bleak. "With your permission, Master Knelle, I would aid you with the bascinet". He understood, nodding. She removed her gauntlets in readiness.

"'Twill not be pretty, Lady Elizabeth. The helmet is merely dented, but her skull must be gravely crushed". She did not reply but stared past his head to where her squire stood in the doorway.

"Send a man you can trust to discover - discreetly, mark me - where the man who did this lies". Richard Shoyswell saluted and withdrew and Knelle had a chilling premonition.

"Now, John" she turned back, "I will lift my sister, and do you thine office. And Kate, if you have no stomach for this sight, then.....".

"She was my friend and bedfellow; I will stay". Bess nodded approvingly at the gentlewoman's staunchness.

"Now, John".

The bascinet was lifted slowly from the head. Kate Cralle uttered a wailing cry and swooned. Bess stared down at her sister's bloody face without apparent emotion. Like all her race in the presence of death, she was rock. Only the forehead was without blood, and she kissed it. Then she inspected the head, untying the arming cap to do so, dropping the bloody article to the floor. The back of the skull had been smashed in by the force of the blow. The brown hair was heavy with blood. She lowered the head gently. "Proceed, John".

The padded leather suit, to which the mail was stitched, alone remained. He pulled the lower half from the body, holding it up at arm's length. Here it was not blood; at death Meg's belly had yielded up its contents. He let it drip, then cast it aside. And then came the most gruesome part of all, the tunic. Between them they removed it; he tossed it aside, the accumulated blood splashing onto the rushes.

He leaned against the block, palms of his big hands supporting him. Soldier that he was, he felt he too might swoon. He breathed deep, and while he did so, Elizabeth looked on him with compassion. In a quiet, distant voice that had the warmth of a January day: "The man who did this will die, John".

"Ay, my Lady" he heard himself saying, "in the absence of Sir Thomas, it is your bounden duty. And 'twill be the easier, for Lady Margaret wounded the bastard greatly, her spike entering his armpit with great force".

She clapped him on the back, trying to smile but failing signally. At this point Cralle revived, with a moan. Bess hauled her to her feet, shaking her as only a woman who despised weakness could do.

"Harken to me, Kate" she began, grittily. "My sister was your friend and your lover, I believe. She has to be cleansed and prepared for the embalmers. She would not have base hands laid on her in life. In death, I swear she will not. If you be so weak that you cannot do this last office for the lady you loved, then must I lay aside mine armour and do it myself".

"Bess" stammered Kate, "I am ashamed of mine weakness. I will do it, though my heart be near to breaking".

"'Tis well". This time Bess did smile, kissing her on the cheek, for Catherine de Cralle was a friend, an equal, a landed lady.

Water was brought and Cralle, rolling up her sleeves, proceeded to the task. Elizabeth, picking up her gauntlets, proceeded with Knelle to the other side of the chamber.

"John, tell me of this matter, the manner of her death".

"Lady, she died as a knight". In her time, and among her class, it was the greatest accolade that could be made from one of gentle birth to another.

She nodded her head, drawing on her gauntlets with great deliberation, wriggling her fingers in the leather. "I doubt it not, John". Her voice was soft, and her glance womanly. Then was she all rock again. "'Twas a mace blow, as I judge. No sword could have so mangled the skull".

"'Twas so, Lady, a mighty blow that would have felled Knolles himself, I dare swear".

"Mayhap a lucky blow?".

"Somewhat of a lucky blow. She had faced many a mace blow and survived. The dog was wounded and swung desperately as I judge. Ay, he was lucky. And he struck from behind as she passed. She could not sway in the saddle, for she saw it not. The armour stood up well but the fierceness of the blow shattered her skull".

"'Twas then a cowardly blow?".

"Nay, 'tis permitted by the laws of chivalry in combat unto death, as this was. He was for the late king. Lady Margaret was for the new. One had to fall. And there had been the foulest insults. 'Twas not just a passage of arms, but kill or be killed".

"Thank you, John. A Despencer!". She was quiet for a moment in contemplation of her sister's courage. Then: "I propose to kill this man in any way I may. I must do it".

"You may be.....". Seeing her grim look he desisted, saying instead: "You have your own squire, this I know, and your own banner. Yet I would attend, with permission, with the Boxhull banner, to witness this gallant deed".

Her heart went out to the man and she smiled. "Come you shall, John Knelle, and welcome shall you be. Meg would have approved. She smiles on you from Heaven. But I must to the chapel to pray. When my servant returns, let me know of it. I would have intelligence of where this man lies, was wounded, thus must have his hurt dressed. Will doubtless lay at the Abbey overnight before going into his own country. Will meet him on the road and avenge my sister. Or die".

Well, she was capable of it, he thought. Then, as she made to leave the chamber, he touched her hand. She turned, surprised. "My Lady" he muttered, pathetically, "think you she does smile on us from Heaven?".

"Truly, John".

"Dost think.....she knew how much I did love her?".

"Ah, John!". She held his hand with much affection. "Of a surety she knew it. 'Twas just your misfortune that she was..... as she was". They both glanced to where Cralle was busy with the shroud. Lady Margaret lay clean and white, where she had been clattered with blood. She looked younger in death. The blood that had gushed from her ears and mouth had been quite cleaned away. He signed himself as he saw the years had fallen away. Kate sniffed: "It happens in death, John. Knew you not?". He knew but it was a miracle nonetheless. She looked now as she had

when he had first lain with her. He thought of the excellence of their love, her strong arms, the lush, deep wetness of her..... and the thought near drove him mad.

In the chapel Elizabeth prayed long and devoutly for the soul of the departed, ending up with a personal prayer that was so typical of her pragmatic attitudes: "Dearest sister, on the morrow I ride to avenge you. Lend me thine strength so that I may strike dead the dog who took the sweet breath from one whose life was an example and shining light for ladies everywhere. You, who feared no man, look upon me with favour".

And Thomas Fenner, the Vicar of Mountfield, called in haste, and now esconced behind a pillar, shook his head in sorrow at the great lady's entreaty. Yet he made no attempt to turn her from her course, for unlike Matthew Tunstall, he accepted that honour to the nobility was what his Faith was to him.

Her servant brought word that the man indeed lay overnight at the Abbey and, his wound dressed, departed in the morning for his own country. Elizabeth smiled thinly, said he had done well, bade Shoyswell give him a coin and returned to Meg's private chamber. She went not to the small room by the chapel, for the embalmers were even then at work, and she had no curiosity as to the process. It would happen to her soon enough, perhaps sooner than she knew. Then she called the two esquires to her.

She bade them sit, and pronounced in this wise. "'Tis afternoon and groweth towards six of the clock as I judge. 'Tis in my mind to return to Echyngham, to rest and sleep. You, Richard Shoyswell, and you, John Knelle, will ride, one on each side of me". The men bowed at the honour. "'Tis further in my mind, early in the morning, to meet this man in his road and slay him". She made the statement matter-of-factly, quietly, and neither man was surprised. Had she not said it, her stock would have fallen in their eyes. She was a strong, game woman, quite capable of carrying out her intent, especially since Despensers was badly wounded. Moreover, Sir Thomas de Echyngham was from home, even if returning as they heard tell. The duty fell to Lady Elizabeth as so often in the past. Sir Thomas, like most young men of his class, wandered where he would, leaning heavily on his much elder sister. "So must we be up betimes, my friends, you and I, before dawn. Have no mind that this man should slip by us".

"Where does your Ladyship plan the meeting?".

"To the south of the New Village, on the hilltop. Where the roads from Rothersbridge and Salehurst join the London Road. There is wide expanse of greensward there, suitable for such pastimes". The men grinned appreciatively. She had the eye of a soldier; she thought as a man, rode like a man, carrying armour with ease. Why had she never married, Knelle asked himself. For all her whoring, she had never conceived that he had heard of. There was something mighty strange here, not after the nature of wenches. "And after" she went on sublimely, "will we return to Glottingham. There is much to do".

The spot she had chosen could scarce have been bettered, for it was where the Hastings to London road dropped down from the hill, to be joined by the road from Rothersbridge as it twisted around the hillside - not the splendidly engineered road that we know (*)

(*) The road that Elizabeth knew was not superseded until the 1830's. It can still be walked by those who do not mind stinging nettles! It has a spur leading due north to the Bodiam road.

but the precipitous and mighty dangerous road that can even now be traced. Where it hit the hilltop another road diverged from it, leading through thick woods to the valley floor a long way below.

Much to do, she had said. Indeed there was. The obsequies of a grand lady like Margaret de Boxhull were no small matter. She would be buried at the Abbey of St. Martin, by the silvery river Rother, as most of her family were. They were great benefactors to this house, it had always been so. But before she was laid in the ground, she would lay in the chapel, guarded by soldiers, for a day, maybe two, to give time for those who wished to pay their respects, if anybody did. Knelle thought sourly that there would be rejoicing in many houses this night, certainly in that of Pelham. There was much competition for the duty of guarding her body. There had even been fisticuffs. Then there were the many Masses. Then she would be leaded, as the saying was, wrapped in lead, then borne with all the panoply of chivalry to the Abbey to be laid with her ancestors. Knelle tried not to think of it. It twisted a knife in his gut. It was impossible he would ever find a mistress like her, the glory of whose body never failed to entrance. He wondered, absently, whether Shoyswell had the Lady Elizabeth's favours. Probably. He seemed to idolise her. Well, why not, he thought generously. She was worth the laying.

So they rode, but not before they had seen the body, wrapped in spotless linen, laid reverently in the chapel, and the men posted. The rise of Margaret's bosom beneath the linen was almost as much as Knelle could bear. It was now so still. He clenched his hands till the bones cracked. He prayed selfishly, asking her to look on him with pity. Rising, he genuflected; then, hearing sobbing, his eyes tried to pierce the gloom of the chapel, and he saw the slight form of the seamstress, Agnes Glyde, she who had been Agnes Pettit on the day Lady Margaret had saved her from rape. Ay, she too, he thought, had cause to bless Lady Margaret's name. Those who knew her, loved her; those who knew her not, or from ill report merely, hated her.

As he mounted his horse, Elizabeth said gently: "She meant much to you, John?".

"Ay, my Lady". His tone was dismissive and she said no more. Why, in God's name, cannot women stay silent, he wondered.

Kate Cralle had spent much time in the chapel, weeping. In fact, she had wept so much, she was exhausted. She had appropriated Meg's steel gauntlets and held them close to her cheek. Now, in her chamber, where she had not slept for years, she flung a fur cloak around her, and curled herself up, fondling these memorials of her beloved. She stared, mistily, at Eleanor of Aquitaine's ring, the single red ruby, that she had drawn from Meg's dead right hand. She had gone into battle wearing it, and she felt sure that Queen Eleanor would have approved of Meg's gallant end. It was then that she drifted off to sleep.

She did not know the hour when she woke, but the moon was shining in at the window, illumining the chamber like day. It was cold. The fur cloak had slipped from her and she reached out to pull it around her. Then suddenly she was aware that she was not alone and stared in dread, for by the window a patch of light which grew larger, formed itself into a glowing, throbbing apparition, which was so obviously Lady Margaret. Sound rattled in Kate's throat and she signed herself in case it was a demon damned. Yet the words that echoed in her head were unmistakeable.

"I come to you in fulfilment of my vow and to remind you of thine. You must not grieve, for 'tis beautiful on this side. Fear not but that I will return on the day of your death. Earthly love does not cease with death. My welcoming arms will receive you, doubt it not. Now, farewell. My time is short".

The light faded with great rapidity and the temperature seemed to rise. Kate could not believe it had happened, but she was very affeared. For the rest of the night she walked the passages, venturing to enter Meg's chamber; and there, on the settle, she slept fitfully.

Meanwhile, at Echyngham, Lady Elizabeth and the two squires had made a late meal off ham and beef, and a quite superior Bordeaux. For the occasion Bess had ordered up some wine that her father had laid down before his death. She ate and drank sparingly, wanting her faculties unimpaired for the morrow. Then they slept, she in her chamber and the two squires where they would.

While it was yet dark, she rose, and finding them, stirred them with her foot. "'Tis time, my friends. Saddle our horses and I will meet you in the courtyard. And then, Richard, come to me. I need your service".

Elizabeth's harness was one of the first complete armours of the white plate type to come into England and it moved Knelle to much admiration. The evening before she had worn bascinet and camail but now she was sealed in gleaming plate from the top of her head to her toes, including the bevor. It impressed him both with its security and its wearer's wealth.

She swung to saddle easily and beckoned a man-at-arms. "Order a horse and cart to follow us. You may guess why". The man nodded, saluted, and went about his task. They climbed the winding hill to the New Village, almost without a word, leaving behind a manor house that watched her go in pride, for each man knew their Captain's intent, and gloried in the guts of her.

"What else could she do?" Jim Lade shrugged. "With Sir Thomas away an' all".

"She'd adone it had he been at home, and you knows it, Jim Lade" grunted Harry Lunsford. "Canst see Lady Elizabeth staying by the fire in a gown when there's fighting to be done? Especially in this quarrel". Everyone laughed.

It being the fourteenth day of October, Knelle could not but recall that it was the anniversary of Senlac fight and say so, at which Shoyswell nodded. It was a frosty morning, but as the sun rose, it would disperse. But now as they sat their horses, in the early day, the grass glistened like so many diamonds, strewn broadcast. And they had a long wait, for it was somewhat after nine when Despenser and his squire were seen at the top of the hill above where they stood. Elizabeth had felt not the cold inside her leather suit, padded as it was; but her breath, issuing through the ventilation holes of her bascinet, hung like a fog in the air before dispersing. Will be warm enough later, she told herself with a sardonic twitch of lips, or permanently cold.

Despenser and his man stopped on the hill. Bess noted that the squire lead Meg's charger, with its armoured protection, and the sight did not lessen Bess's ire. After his brief hesitation, the man Despenser came on, as indeed he had to; yet he was virtually a cripple. His sword arm pained him greatly, especially in the frost. He swore impotently.

Faced with a knight in splendid harness, equipped as for war, the man knew well enough what had to be. He read the banners easily enough, that of the woman he had slain the previous day, and the blue and silver fret of the baronial house of Echyngham. His mother had told him of the famous Elizabeth de Echyngham who had made such a noise in London in the early days of the late king. A relic of the past maybe but one of warlike bent, famous for it, as had been her sister.

He cursed himself for staying at the Abbey, so close to his deed. Why had he not pressed on to Bayham? He knew the answer; he could not have kept to the saddle. The Boxhull woman had been trouble enough. Had he not been so lucky with his mace, she might well have slain him, as she had others. Now here was another Lancastrian bitch. He cursed all women who could not be content with their predestined function and who sought to claim for themselves the prerogatives of their masters.

Elizabeth de Echyngham sat quite still, relaxed and attentive, so that he would have all the time in the world to evaluate her quality. Her sword was at her left, the misericord at the right; before her hung mace and axe. She carried not the flail, since she had not Meg's skill with it. She greatly preferred the sword. His heavy mace was noted and dismissed. She intended to fight at close quarters, where a mace was not so easily used. Meg had liked to fight on the hoof, as the saying was, at a gallop. That was not Bess's way. Seeking for a weakness in his harness, she was sorry not to find one. She saw the dented silver scar on his shoulder where Meg's axe had found its quarry. She would make use of that. She saw too the rent in the mail, under the armpit, where the spike had gone in. It gave her savage joy to know the bastard was in pain. Her eyes were pitiless and there was hate in her heart. Before her eyes she saw her sister's body, silent alabaster, but she controlled herself.

"So, sir, we are well met. 'Tis you who strikes ladies from behind with a club, as I hear, instead of meeting them face to face. A brave knight, i'faith! Sir, you are a craven dog, a disgrace to your spurs, and 'tis I, the Lady Elizabeth de Echyngham, who tell you so".

There, the thing was done and she was grateful for it. No knight could pass over the words spoken. Accoutred as she was, her sex would not save her from his wrath. For war she had come to this place, and war would there be. Behind her visor she smiled at his reaction, hand dropping instinctively to his mace.

"You lie, whore of a thousand beds!" he roared. It was a neat phrase, she thought, and one to be treasured. "And since you will have it so, you will now die".

She laughed bitterly: "You crow mighty loud for so young a cockerel! I doubt me you have the stomach for it. You brag too much for a real fighting man. 'Tis one thing to strike a lady from behind, like a cowardly knave; quite another to meet one face to face. It sticks in my mind, sir, that you are no more than a peasant dog masquerading in the trappings of his betters".

A red mist swam before the fellow's eyes. Wench or no wench, she would die horribly. "Bitch! Whore!" he snarled, "you lay with your sister this day".

Elizabeth drew her sword and awaited the onslaught. The mace rose but he was too angry to aim well. She leaned to the left, and he missed totally. Her laugh mocked him beyond endurance. Closing with him, knee to knee, she delivered two massive blows to the damaged shoulder.

With her simple Faith, the lady believed her sister was aiding her, and it was true that she had great power that morning. But it was the added strength of hate to her well-muscled shoulder. He dropped his mace and betook him to his sword. They clashed furiously and both squires were to agree that they had seldom seen such savagery. No quarter was sought or given, and Elizabeth was single-minded in her butchery. She knew her business and after minutes shored away his shoulder armour. It was the effect at which she had aimed and to achieve which she had taken so much punishment. Gloating, she continued to hack. Despensers knew how vulnerable he was, and panicked. He, a man of war, was being crucified by a woman. Her strength astonished and frightened him. He launched a desperate attack that beat her back, dazed, temporarily helpless; but she was so well protected that she took no scathe. It was his only success. As her mind cleared she closed with him yet again and after three massive blows heard him scream and saw his blood spurt. She was into his shoulder. He was whimpering now, all bluster gone leaving just a residue of fear. Strength is all they have, Ursula had said; take it from them and they are poor creatures enough. Elizabeth's sword was becoming blunted but it would do for this creature. One further ferocious blow and the bone splintered and the arm severed. Lady Margaret's killer himself dropped dead, killed by the shock of the amputation.

Elizabeth backed off. She ached in every limb and muscle, but she had absolutely no remorse. All men expected it of her, and it had been her wish. When one's sister is killed, one has to do something about it. True, she could have crept away in a corner and wrung her hands. Most ladies would, but not she. Nonetheless, she experienced a trembling, and nausea in the pit of her stomach. It had been brutal but a fair fight. Fairer than he had visited upon Meg.

The man's squire, white-faced, dismounted and came forward, unbelieving. "You have slain my master". His speech told her he was a Northerner. He stared from the man he served to the splendid figure above him, unable to come to terms with the fact that a lady had done this thing. "You have slain my master" he repeated, "may God strike you dead!". She laughed but took the abuse. She had no quarrel with this fellow.

Lifting her hand, she called the two squires. They rode up, respectful and awed. Shoyswell, with quite marvellous superfluity, asked how she did. "Well, I thank you, Dick" she replied, conversationally.

"What be your will with this man?".

"John Knelle, you will take Lady Margaret's horse. For your question, Richard, his arms and harness I will have. And..... nay, the horse is too poor a beast for my stable".

This was no more than her right, so the squire raised no objection. Despensers was stripped before her eyes. This was the greatest satisfaction of all. Like Cralle in Norfolk, she insisted on drinking the cup to the dregs, and soon the man lay naked in the dewy grass. Even when she saw the bleeding stump of the shoulder she felt no regret. It might have been her laying there. It was the chance a soldier took. "And his arm armour" she added coldly. The man looked up at the she-wolf and removed his master's gauntlet and unbuckled the steel from the dismembered limb. "You may leave the arm for the boars". The man's mouth moved in silent imprecations. "Now, harken well to me. Take your master and get you off my land and that right speedily". The man enquired as to burial, but she was quite unrelenting. "Have no interest in carrion. Leave him in a ditch an' you list. But not on my land, or 'twill be the worse for you".

They watched the body lashed to the horse and move off led by the squire riding alongside. She turned to Shoyswell: "Follow him till he is off my land. Until midday you will find me at Echyngham. Thereafter at Glottingham". He saluted and moved away.

"And now, Master Knelle, we will to Echyngham. But stay, here is the man with the cart, somewhat tardy to be sure, but no matter. Fellow, collect that steel and bring it to me at Echyngham before noon. 'Tis understood?". He touched his cap respectfully. Knelle stared at her, as she could see, in something akin to worship. "You must be mighty wearied, lady".

She laughed in kindly fashion. "John Knelle, you are a good man, a whole man. You were my sister's friend, and, if I mistake not, her lover. You may call me Elizabeth". He bowed. "Wearied? Ay, but what o' that? The dog is dead. 'Tis a small price to pay".

"Elizabeth, your arm has brought much honour to Echyngham this day".

"I thank you. 'Twas well done?".

"I know not what to say. I have soldiered and have seen many honourable feats of arms, by great lords and knights, and divers of worship. Yet have I never seen arms borne more valiantly, or a more gallant spirit, than today. And you a lady. It passes belief. I dare swear your father smiles on you from his tomb".

Very softly she murmured: "Your words are honey and sweet to mine ears". The man, she reflected, pleased Margaret mightily, when she was not otherwise engaged; and he grieved for her. And now all the woman in her yearned to bring him solace. "Will you not cleanse my sword in the dew before I return it to the scabbard?".

"With a will, Elizabeth". She watched his broad back, holding the banner while he did this squirely duty. Her lips twitched as her privy parts leapt with desire for him. Danger over and her venal self re-asserted itself. She regarded herself in self-contempt. And Meg's cold body yet unburied, 'twas too bad. He slid the sword into the scabbard for her and she smiled down, as he stood by her stirrup. On impulse she reached down her hand, and he took the steel fingers to his lips. O, Men, Men! she thought. How wonderful it is to be a lady. He mounted again.

"Now, John, spur!", suiting the action to the words, he following. Behind them, only the dismembered arm was evidence of her passing.

Sir Thomas de Echyngham rode in somewhat after midday, and the first thing he did, naturally enough, was to seek out his sister. After a brotherly embrace, he stood back to view her harness critically.

"Thought it could only be you, Bess" he grinned. "Met a squire, Lamberhurst way, with a naked body over a horse. Seeing my arms he muttered something about a Lancastrian bitch. Could only be you". Then he frowned. "Miscalled you so much, Bess, that I slew him out of hand". She raised an eyebrow but said nothing. "Handed both bodies over to Sir Robert Poyntel, the vicar of Tyshurst".

Bess wrinkled her nose. "The man who abducted and ravished Parnell Vrensche, and committed other crimes against his flock".

"By all the Saints! Thy memory is long, Bess. The Vrensche affair took place in Edward III's reign".

She smiled faintly, then told him what had happened and he was serious immediately. "Meg.....dead!? I believe it not".

"Neither can I. But 'tis so, more's the pity".

"And you avenged her?"

"Who else but me?"

Young Tom took his sister's hand: "By the Mass! 'Twas a famous feat of arms. I would I had been home".

Gravely she replied: "I too wish it, Tom".

Humorously: "I think you lie, sister".

"In my teeth, brother!"

He laughed again. "But 'twas bravely done. And a Despensers too! I honour you more than ever, Bess".

"She was mine sister, who I loved. No man could slay her so scurvily and myself do nothing".

"You are true knight, no matter that you are a wench. Bess, hear me. Ever since I was old enough, I worshipped you and Meg. Was a little scared of you both, I think, but I adored you too. And now.....this! By Our Lady! 'Twas a gallant deed, for I might have been sisterless this day".

"Not I, brother, not in that cause. There was hatred in my heart. I struck hard, determined to win".

"Was that why you took a cart?"

"'Twas for his harness".

"Not for your body?"

"Had not seriously occurred to me. Was I not well protected?"

"I cannot deny it. That new fangled complete plate..... Must look into that matter for myself. And yet Shoyswell vows you nearly came to grief".

"'Tis so indeed. A moment of weakness I did not repeat".

"Well, Bess, we will leave it. No more compliments". He squeezed her hand and kissed her. "But you know my mind". She knew. "And with Meg slain, Glottingham returns to me. Will you not take it?"

Startled: "What is this, Tom? Leave Echyngham? In the name of God, 'tis my home. Was born here. I have known no other home". Lowering her eyes, she added: "Saving the time I was in London". Now she looked at him straightly. "And now you want me to leave? Why, Tom?"

For a moment he seemed tongue-tied. "Bess, this is the way of it. I would wed. There, 'tis out. She is Margaret Knevett from Norfolk, a beautiful maid, i'faith".

"Why, Tom lad" she murmured, with a slow smile. "'Tis wondrous news indeed. Ay, 'tis time you were wed. You need an heir. These are troublous times. Do it soon. But wherefore must I depart?"

He stared at the tiled floor between his sabatons. "Why, Bess.....'tis hard to say, dearest knight, but in plain terms, she would wish you not here when I bring her home".

Bess coloured: "Why is this, brother?"

"You are well remembered at Court" he muttered, in embarrassed fashion.

"So, 'tis the old charge of whore?"

"Nay, not so. That is no detriment to ladies of family, as you know well".

Wide of eye, she stared: "Then what, in God's name?"

"'Tis her mother, d'you see. You were pointed out to her once in the train of John of Gaunt. You were tall, taller than all the other ladies and all men deferred to you. Then she saw you in the tilt-yard, demonstrating your skill. All men went down before your lance".

"'Twas but a game, Tom, not serious business. I remember it well and 'twas but for an hour. We were a wild lot, before the Revolt, at the Tournaments. Mayhap there were excesses. I mind there were many ladies came attired as men, in brave fashions of the day. We were all young. And this is held against me? 'Tis unfair, Tom".

He sighed: "Ay, but bethink you, Bess. From mother to daughter comes it. And there is your warlike prowess. My Meg is small and slender. Stories about you are legion. You are a known lady, famous for valour. Everywhere I ride I am complimented on my sister. Men's eyes boggle, Bess. It makes me mighty proud. Yet the poor girl is.....is.....".

"Demoralised, you would say?"

"If that is the word. You are the better scholar".

Bitter she riposted: "She thinks mayhap I would challenge her to combat?"

"Nay, Bess. She can carry mail but little else. But she feels humiliated". He began to laugh. "The thought of you twain in the lists.....".

Elizabeth stared long at her brother, then sighed wearily: "Well, what must be, must be, Tom. I will take Glottingham. 'Tis a fine house, and someone like me suits a castle better than a manor house in truth". She crossed to the chamber window and stared out along the valley, where the Rother meandered to its meeting with the sea at Rye. "Yet to leave all this, that I have known so long, you ask much, Tom".

He stared at her tall, statuesque body with admiration. "But, Bess.....".

"Fear not, Tom. I make no trouble. For your sake I will take Glottingham. The girl is right. I would be a daily reminder of what she is not. And a lady must be mistress in her own house". She turned, with a sad smile. "But know you to what you condemn Bess? Every chamber at Glottingham will echo to the sound of Meg's foot, every time I enter the chapel I shall see her mangled body in mine eye, every time I ride forth I shall pass the spot where she fell, when men look upon me they will see the mistress they loved and would have followed to Hell.....".

"Then must you be as knightly as she, and a good Captain to your men".

"I will try, Tom".

"And you are a rich lady. Life can be very good. I give you one third of the profits of the Suffolk estate in addition".

"'Tis generous, Tom".

"'Tis your due, Bess. Could I do less? And there is no hurry, in God's name. We do not wed until the Spring. Ample time to pack your women's stuff". He grinned. "And your armours, of course, and your arms. Whatever household stuff you wish from Echyngham, 'tis thine, you know that. And your own men and women".

"I may take Shoyswell?"

"Nay, leave me Shoyswell. He taught me much. The man suits me well. You will have Meg's squire, John de Knelle. A goodly man

and a fine soldier. He will serve you well. But enough, Bess. We will speak of this again when we have laid our beloved sister in the earth".

They then rode to Glottingham along the river valley. It was the best, and quickest way, when the river was not in flood. Bess suddenly laughed: "By the time we draw level with Boxhull, Knelle will know we ride. You say truly, brother, he is a good soldier. Was with me this morning, but he seemed anxious to return home - I may say that now! - so I let him ride".

All the way Glottingham was visible on its hill, the tall west tower rising above the trees, seeming to stare towards Echyngham. It was a goodly residence, although, before Meg, much neglected by the family, except for hunting. Bess was happy it would be hers, though with a pain around the heart at the absence of its chatelaine.

Now, Tom Echyngham had not wished Meg dead, but it suited him well enough. Bess was a dominant personality, and she had ruled Echyngham for a long, long time. He had known that if wished to be master in his own house, he would have to find her an estate. As for Meg's son, Alan, he had the Dorset estate and seemed content enough. Ay, things had worked out very well.

"Your maid comes well dowered, I trust?" Bess said, after a while. "Ay, two manors in Norfolk. Did think about giving you one, Bess, when they are mine".

"Nay, Tom, a pesky cold place, Norfolk, and a flat. 'Twould be inconvenient for me. Would want to oversee them, and Norfolk is a faraway place. And as you say, I have riches enough".

As they rode into the courtyard at Glottingham, Knelle ran to take their horses. It seemed as if the place was full of horses and palfreys. "How now, John" Elizabeth asked, astonished.

"Has been like Cheapside" he growled. "Paying respects to the Lady Margaret". He spat. "People who would not give her the time o' day whilst she yet lived. A pox on 'em, say I. Saving your presence, Sir Thomas".

Echyngham grinned appreciatively. "You show a pretty spirit, Knelle. Yet courtesy costs naught. I think Lady Elizabeth has words to say".

Bess took him on one side and told him, in brief, what was decided and asked him straight out whether he would serve her as he had Lady Margaret. The delight on his face was enough answer, but he bowed.

"'Tis honour undoubted, my Lady. You take up residence?".

"As soon as may be. You may tell the men".

"They will be happy to serve under so valiant a Captain". Bess flushed with pleasure. To have the regard of soldiers was her great joy.

"Why, John, you play the courtier, I think".

"Not I. I repeat what all men say. And to think you slew that dog! All the countryside marvels. To my life's end I shall rejoice that I should have seen it". He paused, looking her over. "When your convenience serves, will have the armourer hammer out those dents o' thine. Though 'tis good that these people should remark your valour".

"You hate well, John".

"Nay, I do but grieve for the Lady Margaret. She felt it keenly, their disregard. Now, when she lies dead.....". He choked. "But enough. Mayhap I say too much".

She clasped him on the shoulder in a comradely way and went in, where she found Thomas in conversation with some local magnates. Her entry was greeted with applause. The ladies, kerchiefs a-flutter, stared wide-eyed, at once admiring and resentful. All saw the evidence of her struggle and were impressed. One old knight took her hand to his lips with frank admiration: "By St. Michael! but was bravely done. Would we had had you at Crecy!". This sally broke the ice somewhat.

Elizabeth was by no means put out; her days at Court had given her a grace and sophistication rare in the countryside. She laughed softly: "Sirs and Ladies, if you will permit me, I will lay aside mine armour and come to you more aptly gowned".

The falsetto cooing of the ladies vied with the gruff approval of the men. As she left the chamber, a St. Leger said to Echyngham: "I'll wager you be proud of your sister, Tom".

"In truth. And I have given her Glottingham for life. Who better to defend this end of my lands. Like Meg afore her".

Elizabeth put in an appearance later, to receive both condolences and compliments from her neighbours; and she was something to look at. In a black gown of Margaret's, trimmed with silver, she seemed to glide, a serene, tall woman in her prime. It was hard to credit that, a few hours earlier, she had been in mortal contention; yet the yellowing bruise on her neck drew all eyes. But she had enemies, of course. A lady, allied to the Pelhams, oozing spite bent down to whisper in the ear of Lady Hoo: "The whore gives herself the airs of a Duchess!".

The frail, ailing Lady Hoo, who had been an especial friend of Lady Margaret, glanced up: "With some justification, would you not say, my dear?". The lady fell silent.

They drank their wine while Elizabeth computed. Not long since Margaret had laid down thirty hogsheads of Gascony, twenty of Bordeaux. Bess thanked God for her sister's foresight. She was later to remember that ladies were feline, for as one of them rode beneath the portcullis, she laughed, remarking to her neighbour: "Twenty years ago I prayed that someone would cut the bitch down. And when I heard the tidings, I rejoiced". And that same neighbour was heard to laugh: "Ay, and now we have An-acre-a-night Bess. May Heaven preserve us from her, as from the other".

Tom put his hand on his sister's arm: "Nay, Bess, boggle not at a word. Meg was worth three of that fool, as are you". No matter, it hurt.

As the castle fell silent, and the spluttering of the torches in the sconces could be plainly heard, the men came to encase Meg's body in lead. Bess paled: "Tom, let us go and look upon Meg while we yet may". The chapel was quiet after the goings and comings, and they knelt by the bier. The priest melted into the shadows, away from the fitful, unstable light shed by the torches. Then came the men, standing at the back, waiting till the gentry had finished their prayers. They shuffled uncomfortably, knowing themselves as welcome as a ghost at a wedding feast. Elizabeth, turning her head on a sudden, saw them, and half-choking with emotion murmured: "'Tis time, Tom. Leave her we must, till our spirits join with her again in eternal life". Tom Echyngham muttered: "Ay, but how young she looks. 'Tis a marvel".

On their way out, he nodded to the big men, in their greasy jerkins: "Do thine office". They were the first base hands that ever touched Meg, but as Bess reflected, that was not really Meg who lay there, just her husk, the earthly container of her brave spirit, that was even now in Paradise with Ursula, in whose company she hoped herself to be, one day. All that now remained was the internment. She returned to Meg's chamber, which was now hers.

When she had gone, Tom called Knelle to him. "You have agreed to serve Lady Elizabeth?"

"With a will, Sir Thomas".

"'Tis well. Attend her well, John. She grieves overmuch, inwardly, yet it is in my mind that Margaret would not have wanted it. I can hear her laugh, and say: 'What ails you, Bess? We knew it had to happen one day'. What say you?"

Knelle stared. "Is't not natural? They were sisters, loving sisters.....'tis natural, sure".

"Ay, 'tis natural. Yet I would not have her grieve in the way she does. She weeps not, and it troubles me. Tears are a release for both man and woman. But she went out and killed this man".

"It occurred to me, Sir Thomas, that her grief fought for her this day. Without it, mayhap.....".

"Ah, so!". This had not occurred to him, and he looked long at the squire. "'Tis true what men say of you, John Knelle. Have more between your ears than bone and water". Knelle grinned. "Now tell me of the Lady Margaret, her life here".

So Knelle indulged the younger man with a pithy resume of the lady's life and it seemed the young man was much in ignorance of his sister's history. What particularly intrigued him were the feats of arms she had had to undertake.

"These challenges were frequent?"

"Frequent enough".

"How came it?"

"The Lady Margaret was not liked. She was hard but just. Yet it was not this. She had enemies, some were here today, as you heard. Her rule was harsh, 'tis true, but the lands were swept clean, and all men profited. The peasants by living a peaceful, ordered life under her protection; all others by travelling in security without fear of having their throats slit. But 'twas not this either. She was famous for her abilities in the field. I followed her and I may tell you that she was a fine commander. Men can accept this from another man, but not from a lady. Thus, any wanderer with a claim to gentility, any knight without revenues, came here seeking advancement, knowing if he could slay 'Meg o' the Axe', his sword would find readier employment".

"This has been going on.....how long?"

"When the land was settled, after the revolt. Say, 1382".

"So long?". Sir Thomas whistled. "I realised not. That is twenty-five years".

"Even so. And after Sir Roger rode to war in the same year, she was alone".

"And she turned no one away?"

"No one. For the honour of Echyngham and Boxhull she could not. Her honour was on her sword point. She was too proud to accept the calumny on refusal".

"Ay, I see that. This took place when I was a child?"

"Even so".

"And she did not complain?"

"At first she was bitter, knowing the reason. Often she said she wished she had been born a man".

"'Twould have been easier".

Knelle nodded. "Then I verily believe she came to enjoy it".

"And you?"

"At first I worried for her. Then I saw that she was as good as any man, and I troubled no more. Did once ride to Echyngham to see Lady Elizabeth. She heard me out, smiling. Then she made me understand. That was when you were at Warbleton with Lady Cralle".

"So long ago?"

"Ay".

"And she was carrying my burdens all that time?"

"She and Lady Elizabeth jointly. And they were proud to do it".

"And you say she went to her death in debonair fashion?"

"That she did, Sir Thomas. Like a knight. I have seen many deaths in the field. But hers was edifying. Being a man I think all courage is a manly prerogative. But 'tis not so. And I believe she knew after the first blow that she was mortally stricken. And I further believe that she turned with a high heart, seeking despatch. 'Tis what I believe. She was a fine lady".

After Knelle had left, Sir Thomas sat staring before him, pulling at his beard, absently. From below he heard a man's laughter, then the sound of the armourer's hammer. With a sigh he rose and went to bed, having no wish to see Meg's body in lead until the morrow. With great honour should she be buried, with all the panoply of chivalry that man could devise, and her banner should go before her denoting a valorous knight on the last journey. The morrow came sooner than Elizabeth cared for, and yet she knew it had to be faced.

For the burial she had agreed, albeit reluctantly, to wear a gown. It was not the gown that troubled her - like ladies in any age her mind was much taken up with clothes - but the fact that nothing more substantial than woven cloth protected her from an arrow, troubled her much. Thomas and her squire assured her of her security, but Bess felt mighty vulnerable. In 1399 she was of the older generation, and she had been brought with a very healthy respect for the English archer. Jane Alard was ever present in her memory. Now, a bow was a weapon that nobody of her class would demean themselves with; knightly steel was all that mattered. But the bow had power. She had not been born at the time of Crecy, but old knights had told her of it, likewise Poitiers. She would live to hear of Azincourt with pride, and she still remembered the arrow that had transfixed her in 1381, emptying her saddle. It was a painful memory, for even now in cold weather she had a twinge where it had struck. That is why steel plate was such a comfort to her.

Nevertheless, she could not very well turn up at the Abbey in armour, not for a burial, so she had agreed, but with the greatest disquiet, to dress in conformity with her sex. It was to honour Margaret if nothing else. So in the morning her women attired her in her mourning dress, a splendid black gown with blue shields around the hem, inside a border of silver. Over

this she wore a cloak of black. She was an elegant lady indeed and her lips twitched as she thought of the peasant women who would see her as they passed through Rothersbridge. She was to ride side-saddle, a fashion brought into England by Anne of Bohemia, the late king's first wife; and mighty becoming it was for a lady, Elizabeth considered, as she drew on her black gloves.

The obsequies of a lady like Margaret de Boxhull were no small matter. First came twenty-five poor men bearing torches, which were lit as they passed through Rothersbridge. Then came the chariot, containing the lead coffin, which was covered with cloth of gold. On this, in defiance of convention for a lady, lay her sword and bascinet. The chariot itself was covered by a rich cloth of red cendal, and was drawn by six black horses.

Behind the chariot rode four clergy - the incumbents of Echyngham, Munfield, Brightling and Salehurst. That is to say, Sir Thomas Norberton, Sir Thomas Fenner, Sir Walter Ammeney and Sir John Lyt-lyngton.

Then came the hired mourners, one each for every year of her age, in black houppelandes with deep cowls.

Behind these came the family, Sir Thomas de Echyngham, Lady Elizabeth on a white palfrey, richly caparisoned, Catherine de Cralle, John Knelle and the deceased body servants. Behind these came the common people, and of these there were many, for no matter what her reputation was, the common report of her, she had been a kind and generous mistress to those who served her.

From Elizabeth's point of view, however, the men-at-arms were more important. Forty men of Glottingham rode on the left, and forty men of Echyngham rode on the right, all with breastplates and helmets new scoured. When the cortege came within bowshot of a wood, the men would ride into it, beating the undergrowth with their swords. So Elizabeth returned to Glottingham in the pristine condition she had left it, but her apprehensions had been very real. She had wondered, within herself, what the Abbot could say by way of eulogy Meg having been what she was, but in fact William Lewes excelled himself.

It was on the return journey that Elizabeth said to her brother: "Tom, I think I will remove myself from Echyngham with all decent speed".

"'Tis as you wish, Bess, but truly there is no haste".

But there were good reasons for her decision. Empty shoes had to be filled with some promptitude. But on that day there was too much to do to think of the future. Alms having been distributed to the people, it was time for the funeral baked meats and private grief.

Ladies had little testamentary freedom. In 1344 Parliament had complained that churchmen allowed "serfs and women to make wills, which is against reason". It was civil (or secular) law, not canon law, that was anti-female; it was the civil courts that declined to admit the words of women in proof "because of their frailty". This insulting attitude the two sisters had battled against all their lives and Lady Margaret, remembering the difficulty there had been in getting Ursula's will proved, made no attempt to leave her own written instructions. Glottingham would return to Echyngham by law and it was purely a question of her personal effects. She had accordingly made her dispositions before her death. Her clothes and arms were to go to Bess; Ursula's large collection of jewels went to Kate, plus Queen Eleanor's ruby for the term of Kate's earthly life. When Cralle died it was to pass to Bess. The resources of the armoury were to be at the disposal of both ladies, as before. And as for Kate, Bess had undertaken to treat her as a sister for as

long as she lived, and to the end of her days Kate enjoyed the same status as she had enjoyed with Lady Margaret - that is to say, companion and helpmate, an equal in every way, except the one way that had meant so much to Kate. Thus, she had to maintain her separate establishment at Glottingham. Yet, they lived together, ate together, worked together, rode together, as in the past; except for the visit Kate made, once every three months, to her own manor in Kent, keeping a careful eye on her steward's proceedings and collecting her rents, an exercise in which she was as meticulous as had been her mentor.

Yet on that funeral day, Elizabeth and Kate clung to each other in womanly distress. Bess had a reputation for not weeping, yet she had wept at the Abbey, seeing Meg lowered into the ground; and back at Glottingham she did so unrestrainedly. Sir Thomas was pleased to see it; it was healthy, and he and Knelle retired to another chamber.

For Bess grief would pass, but for Cralle it never passed, for whereas Bess had lost a beloved sister, Kate had lost her lover. Her life had been centred in and around Meg and without her she knew loneliness. Her life had lost its purpose. Sometimes love can be all consuming; Margaret had created Kate in her own image and without her mentor, Cralle felt lost, a ship without a rudder. She became bitter, and hard; not to Bess, indeed, but to inferiors and this troubled Bess greatly, for she knew to what it could lead, and had lead in the past. So she remonstrated with her on the subject and after a flood of tears, things improved. Yet when they had trouble on the road, Bess who was sparing with her power, was often shocked by Kate's violence and savagery. Looking at her Bess often thought she saw again Ursula de Ukkefeld visiting merciless retribution on wrong-doers, such was Kate's fondness for the rope and the sword. Yet Cralle was a brave woman, and because of that Bess overlooked much that otherwise she would have reproved.

Immediately after the funeral, there were things to do. Christmas loomed and the usual festivities took place. Kate, having made a lightning descent on her manor, and thereafter riding to London, rode in on Christmas Eve, looking magnificent, and with a packhorse loaded with presents. Bess watched her gleaming body ascend the keep stairs, shaking snow from her cloak as she came, laughing gaily when she saw Bess, and rushing into her arms. It was the old Kate, she of the lilting laugh and giggling inconsequence. And Bess was glad to see it. Having shed her armour, it was obvious to Bess that Kate had spent her time in Cheapside very profitably indeed.

Nonetheless, the Christmas of 1399 was a bitter-sweet affair. Bess took her seat in the high chair at the top table with pride and sadness, Cralle beside her. Who could forget that a year before Lady Margaret had sat in that very chair, as she had for twenty-five years, bridging the gap from youth to mature womanhood. Consequently the jollity was a trifle forced until wine and ale took charge of the assembly.

Christmas and Twelfth Night once over, there was Thomas's wedding to think about. This necessitated a journey to Norfolk at the back end of March, where in the chapel of the Knyvett castle at Buckenham, Thomas was joined in wedlock to his Margaret.

Elizabeth left Glottingham in the capable hands of Kate Cralle, and since she had Wenham to lean on, it was certain that matters would be safe enough.

As to Norfolk, like her sister before her, Elizabeth found it mighty cold once she was out of her padded leather suit and harness, even though she wore the Russian furs she had bought in Augsburg, nine years before. Yet there was no rain or snow, just an icy wind, blowing off the North Sea with concentrated venom.

Margaret Knyvett was indeed a charming girl, even as Tom had said but slim and of lower than average height. Elizabeth looked down on her in kindly fashion, yet she could see that she daunted the girl. It was probably the first time that she had come face to face with a famous courtesan, and the fact that she was a retired not to say reformed, courtesan, did not seem to lessen the girl's embarrassment, for she had been strictly raised. It amused Bess to note that when they sat together, the wench kept a distance between them, as if she feared contamination. Bess foresaw many inconveniences in her relationship with her brother after the new lady was installed at Echyngham. But she shrugged her forebodings away. She determined to ride for home at the earliest moment she decently could.

It was on the evening before she rode that over the family meal she strove mightily - mayhap too mightily - to create an easy relationship with the Knyvett family. In retrospect, she wished she had not done so, for having complimented the parents on the charm of their daughter and the fair mien of their son, the father sighed: "Ay, Meg is a credit to her mother, and my son is well enough. Yet do I yet grieve for my first born son, for he was a fine man and promised great things. Yet" - he placed his hand on his son's shoulder - "am I sure that George here will also make us proud of him". The boy was seen to colour and look away and Bess guessed he had always had to live in the shadow of the other son's memory.

"You had another son? I knew not".

"Ay, that was our John" the mother said sadly. "It scarcely bears speaking on, yet if you are interested Lady Elizabeth.....".

"'Twas this way. I trained John to be a soldier and he became a mercenary as many young men do. He went across the seas and took service with the Swiss. He was at Nafels fight (*). 'Twas a bloody encounter as I hear tell, in which a small number of Swiss defeated Duke Albert and killed near on two hundred knights and gentlemen. My son slew a Margrave and took his harness, as the custom is, and it was this same harness that caused his death as I believe. Or murder, should I say".

"Murder!".

"Ay, so it was, for he was found most piteously slain. He returned home in time for Christmas in 1388. And in 1389 I kept him by me, for his mother's sake, finding him employment on the estate. Yet I knew he longed to depart and did so purpose. Then one day in the summer did I send him with a letter to his uncle nigh unto Cambridge, bidding him to visit us for a period. He purposed to lodge with his uncle overnight and return the next day".

"As he did" murmured the mother, emotionally, "would to God he had not".

"Ay, truly, for when he did not return I sent out men to search his road, and they found him naked, in a ditch, about two leagues south of Thetford, with a hole in his neck large enough to take two men's fingers".

(*) The battle of Nafels was fought on 9th April, 1388.

"Horror!" Elizabeth heard herself saying. She broke out into prickly heat, to be followed by a deep chill. She intercepted a warning look from her brother.

"Ay, indeed, Lady Elizabeth. Some dog had killed him for his harness, doubtless. For it was very fine, Italian, of great strength. For as you know, a Margrave is the same as a Marquis in our own country, a great noble. And yet I marvel, for my son was a fine soldier, well regarded. Did I beg him to wear a bevor that day? He would not, for 'twas warm. He laughed saying that camail would be sufficient and would allow air to reach his neck and so keep him cool as he rode. Alas, foolish boy!".

Elizabeth felt pity but her dominant feeling was pride in Kate, for it was obviously she who had slain John Knyvett. Her scalp crawled for she knew that the harness hung in her own armoury.

"Did you ever discover who had done the deed?". Tom frowned at her but it was too late.

"Nay, but it was not for the lack of trying. I sent out men enquiring at every tavern in and around Thetford for news of any soldiers lodging there at the time, but all to no avail. There was a French lord, returning from pilgrimage at Walsingham shrine, yet nothing was certain. No man could remember his arms, for the lower orders are ignorant of such matters".

Within herself Elizabeth felt a bubble of merriment, and mighty unseemly it was. She thought, thank God you did not think of asking at the nunneries! Her thoughts were interrupted by George Knyvett. "And yet" he growled, "do I ever see a man wearing my brother's harness, he will not live to enjoy it, that I swear".

"Well said, my son" muttered the father approvingly.

Soon after this Elizabeth said she would retire, for she had a long, hard march on the morrow, she and her men. In half-hearted manner they courteously begged her to remain another day, whereat she smiled and claimed her great estates as a reason for departing on the appointed day.

It was near enough midnight when there was a discreet tap at her chamber door. She did not need to ask who it was and she called out: "Come in, Tom".

When he sat by her bed, she frowned at him. "Why did you not warn me of this?".

"Margaret and the wedding fair drove it out of my mind. Yet I should have warned you in truth. 'Tis, must be the harness that Kate wears sometimes. And yet I profess myself all amazed at her skill. Yet Meg trained her and I should not be amazed".

"Indeed you should not. But I would I had known before. I would not have spoken".

"'Twould have been better. But mark me, Bess. Warn Kate at once. She must never wear that harness if she visits us. Meg may have been young when her brother was slain, but she has heard it described so often.....".

Elizabeth smiled. "Rest easy, Tom. Kate is no fool".

In the morning she called John Knelle to her, and he armed her expeditiously. Yet was he disgruntled. "Shall be glad to reach home. This country, I like it not. 'Tis flat, and plaguey cold. Give me Sussex".

"So say I, John" she laughed, "so ride we. 'Tis unlikely we shall come this way again".

The new Lady de Echyngham stood by her stirrup and looked up at her. Again she was daunted by this impressive personage. "I look forward to seeing you at Echyngham, Elizabeth. I am sure we shall be good friends".

Bess smiled. "I hope so, Meg".

"And I need your help".

"Indeed?"

"Ay. My husband desires me to learn your skills. He says no one can teach me more".

"That may well be true. But you are not strong".

"I will be".

"In that case" Elizabeth smiled, "it shall be my privilege". She lifted her hand. "Forward!".

A little while later, when Buckenham was a mere speck on the horizon, Knelle remarked: "Not promising material, Lady Elizabeth".

"Not an Echyngham, certainly, except by marriage. Yet must we try, John".

Two days later they rode into Glottingham, late in the evening. The first thing she did was to tell Kate, who stepped back, with great astonishment. "Nay, Bess, I'll not believe it".

"Yet, 'tis true, however".

Later, Kate sighed: "Ay, it must be true, Bess. But marvel how that harness has travelled! From Italy to the Margrave. Knyvett took it from him after combat. I took it from Knyvett likewise. I wonder who is marked to take it from me?".

"Who can say? Think not of it. You may bequeath it to me when you drop, an' you will. 'Twould please me mightily. Yet not too soon I trust".

"Amen to that" Cralle smiled, signing herself.

Later in 1400 Elizabeth had somewhat of a quarrel with the Abbot of Rothersbridge. Wishing Meg to be commemorated in brass she rode to the Abbey. She wanted Meg's representation to be in military dress, but the Abbot refused. "Nay, she was a lady, however she lived. What would those who come after say? The brass must show her as a lady". And Bess, who had made provision for her own body to be laid beside her sister, and Cralle who had equally made provision to be laid near them both, seethed. Yet there was nought they could do. Men had the last word, as they always had. The one concession she was able to wrest from the Abbot was that the effigy should bear the SS collar of the House of Lancaster. This, as the Abbot admitted, was only fair since she had lived and died a partisan of the family. And so it was. (*)

(*) Regarding these brasses, it is unlikely that the Protestant predators would have failed to remove them in 1538, as they were eminently saleable. Should the abbey church ever be excavated, this matter will be resolved.

Our story is now reaching its end.

The years between 1399 and 1421, while Elizabeth ruled at Glottingham, were years of relative peace, wherein day followed day, and season followed season with an almost idyllic placidity. It is true that there was the occasional upsurge of violence, so typical of the time. For instance, 1413 was a bad year.

Henry IV died and was succeeded by the young Henry V, to the glory of England. More importantly for Elizabeth, it was also the year that, sword in hand, Catherine de Cralle, was killed. Bess knew it was the way she had wanted to go, and so did not grieve too much. Yet on that 12th December when she bore her home, tied to her horse, she knew herself alone. The lady had died as a knight, in combat, and Bess could not have wished her a finer end. Bess was a mite jealous for she knew her to be in Heaven with Margaret and Ursula, and yearned to be with them. But her time was not yet.

She helped Knelle to strip her friend, drawing Queen Eleanor's ruby from her dead hand, as it had been arranged she should, and placed it on her own hand. And then, in due time, she had followed her sadly to the Abbey where she had been interred with all the ceremonies due to her rank. Then it was back to Glottingham.

At a personal level she missed a village at her gate, as she had had at Echyngham. The village of Munfield was nearly a mile away and the castle stood isolated and forbidding on its ridge. Her loneliness was partly ameliorated, it is true, by callers who turned aside to see her. They were less now, for considerations of age crept in. Yet she was a famous lady or had been in her time, even though something of a relic now of a bygone age. She was now forty-seven, old as matters were then understood. Still, men were not averse to sampling the delights that she could still provide.

Every week, too, she visited Tom at Echyngham, where the Lady Margaret was no longer in awe of her splendid sister-in-law. By now she was a mother and firmly in control of her household. But she was strong enough now to wear full harness and Tom was very proud of her, having laboured mightily to instruct her.

Back home, Bess took John Knelle as her lover. It was all quite unofficial, for she knew she could never marry without surrendering her freedom of action, which she would in no wise do. But Knelle was a comfortable lover, never demanding, yet servicing her well when she felt the need of it.

It was in 1414 when she was sitting discussing manorial matters with Knelle one morning. As they talked, one came running. Bess looked up. "My Lady.....My Lady.....".

"Ay, Dickon, what ails you, lad?"

"'Tis happening again. One comes riding and it looks like much trouble".

Knelle snapped an oath: "Armed, say you?"

"From top to toe, Master Knelle".

"Let us even see" Elizabeth said calmly.

Standing on the tower overlooking the drawbridge, they looked down at the man. He was well armed indeed. She enquired as to his business. "You are the mistress of this house?"

"I am Elizabeth de Echyngham. What then?"

He bowed in the saddle, most courteously. "For the honour of my lady, I beg a passage of arms with you, most redoubtable lady".

Elizabeth was enchanted. The language came from the past, straight out of the days of knight errantry. She laughed, turning to John Knelle: "Poor soul! The boy is smitten, in love as the saying is". She turned back: "My young friend, for young you are I think, this is a piece of foolishness that I cannot indulge". She felt more than saw Knelle tense. "I am an old lady, and you are a young man. The match is unseemly".

The young man raised his visor and stared up at her, astonished: "You refuse to meet me, sword in hand?"

"Ay, sir, I refuse. In the name of God, man, you might be mine son. Do you wish to slay such a one?"

The bewildered fellow merely stared, casting around in his mind for an explanation of such an unlooked for event, but in the end he settled for the timeless and, to her, boring insult: "You are a craven whore!"

She was sad but patient. "Sir, if you would honour your lady, take your sword and follow the trade of mercenary. She will honour you, believe me, far more than if you soil your blade with the blood of an old lady".

Knelle touched her arm, hesitantly, anxiously, and whispered urgently: "This must not be, Lady Elizabeth. Bethink you of the men. And your reputation in the countryside. He will spread evil reports, and men will laugh at you". His distress was writ plain on his face. "For the honour of Echyngham you must do this thing. Fear must find no place in your heart". Elizabeth glanced down at her men in the courtyard, and to those on the wall; they were staring at her with incredulity. Then he delivered his last shot: "And what would the Lady Margaret say?"

"Damn you, John Knelle!"

"Ay, my Lady. But you know what I say is true".

She turned back to the man below her. "Sir, it seems as if I must meet you. I have been reminded of my duty. You must be patient. When I have armed myself I will come to you. But I warn you. I shall slay you out of hand. Mayhap then I shall be permitted to live in peace".

As they returned to her chamber, Knelle commented: "Peace! You will never know peace. If your ladyship desires peace, you should marry. Would then have a man to fight your battles".

"I need no man to fight my battles!"

"Then, by Our Lady, you must fight them yourself".

She stared briefly, knowing he spoke out of love for her: "Get out. I will call you when I need you". She wanted to weep, and she hated to weep; but weep she did. She was not afraid; that was not why she wept. But she could see that she could never break free from the conventions of her time. And later, as he was arming her, he tried to explain matters.

"My Lady, there are some men who cannot live with the idea that a lady has prowess in arms, equal to his own. Did I not serve you, did I not love you, I would myself mayhap find it difficult to accept. It is this way. Your upbringing placed you on the level of men. Therefore they treat you as a man, and feel free to challenge you in the same way they would a man. If they could slay you, their fame would be great indeed. We live in lawless times and most ladies need protection. 'Tis why they marry, so that the

defence of their person is assured. But you have warlike pretensions". He bent down for the breastplate. "I tell you true, at first your sister liked it not. Yet she came to accept it and, as you know well, in a perverse way enjoyed it, placing her honour high. This is something you must do, even unto death. Your men expect it of you".

"John de Knelle" Elizabeth murmured, with a half smile, "in bed you are the man for me. Out of bed you are also the man for me. For you remind me of my duty. You say true, I will not marry for independence sake, therefore am I alone. And being alone there is no help for it. I must summon up my courage and face this man, and any other man. I must not seek to hide behind mine gown".

Busy with the taces, he grunted. "Your ladyship understands very well, I know, in her heart. 'Twas just that for a moment you took refuge in your womanly nature. But it cannot be, not for you". Then he laughed. "And as for summoning up your courage, 'tis laughable. The sisters Echyngham are made of courage. 'Tis but that you are.....are.....".

"Circumspect, you would say".

"If that is the word. Your ladyship is the educated one. I am just a poor squire who loves his betters".

"Never so, John. You are a gentleman".

"It may be. But I know naught but arms. I have letters 'tis true, but I have always preferred hard knocks".

His mock-modesty made her smile. "So must I, seemingly. Is all firmly buckled, Sir Squire?"

"All firm. There is but your leg armour, gorget and helmet. Be patient with my old fingers. You can trust me, as did Lady Margaret".

"I doubt it not, John. In all matters I trust you. You understand me? In all matters".

He grinned. "I understand your ladyship well. But this could be serious business. Will you not keep your legs still?"

"I chafe to be a-doing, John".

"Yet must you be patient. A knight takes time to equip". Her heart warmed at the words, and although he saw it not, she bent her loving gaze to where he knelt. "That man outside now. He will be biting his finger ends, I doubt not".

"The longer he has to wait.....".

"Ay, you are a good tactician. Will you slay him as you said?"

"Not unless I have to. I was angered when I spoke".

"Yet take care. Would not wish to see you miscarry".

"Nor would I, dear friend, nor would I".

They cheered her as she rode out, as they had Lady Margaret. It pleased her. And yet it was a mere nothing, this meeting. The boy had been taught well enough, but of course he lacked experience. As a result she was gentle with him, although he was not gentle with her. She did not hold it against him, knowing that her reputation was such that could he but lay her in her tomb, his fame would be great indeed. So she approached the matter in all seriousness. This was not simply practice, going through the motions with blunted weapons. It was experience versus youthful vigour, although she was no longer the woman she had once been. Then it had been exciting, combat. Now she asked nothing more than be left

alone. She was deeply resentful, finding this challenge an irritant rather than a stimulant. Yet she did not want to humiliate the boy, nor to have his life on her hands. Yet, as his sword beat down on her well armoured body, boredom turned slowly to anger, and her mind became keen. He had to be chastised, if only for his own good. He was too presumptuous by half. Was she not Elizabeth de Echyngham? Who was he, this fledgling knight? He had given his name as Belknap, a good family from Beckley way. Well, no matter, he must be dealt a lesson he would not forget. Old lady or not, he would remember her well, ay, very well.

Presently then, with a savage twist of her strong wrist, she watched his sword fly skywards, foul a branch of a tree, before falling to earth again. She'd heard the lad's cry, muffled to some extent in his helmet, with some pleasure. He had asked for it, had he not? He was learning that combat, while in the nature of his sex, was not merely pleasure, but pain also. The point of her sword had ripped his leather gauntlet and blood gleamed along the cut. He held his tortured hand tightly between his left arm and his body and she knew he was trying hard not to cry out with the pain of it. She could see the blood trickling down the steel, not quickly, for the incision had not been deep. Yet he had got off lightly enough. Yet, being a lady, she was sorry.

She watched while his squire, a lad as young as he was, dismounted and reclaimed the blade. Astonishment was writ large on his face, for his master was accounted a good swordsman among his familiars. This bitch must have made a pact with the Devil.

"You are content, sir?" Elizabeth enquired, without too much loss of breath, although the fight had been fierce, if of short duration. "Your lady will be honoured?"

"Will give her pride to bind my wound" the lad gasped, "and I shall always remember our meeting. Yet had I hoped to slay you. But your ladyship has bested me. I complain not".

"You sought my life? I understand well, and like yourself, I complain not. Yet I regret the spilling of your blood. 'Twas no part of my wish to meet you, but having met you I find you a worthy opponent and a gallant young man. Yet have you much to learn, and although you sought my life, I forgive you. I have you remark also that by the law of arms your life is at my disposal". He noted, with alarm, that she still held her naked sword; yet he had never heard of her as a bloodthirsty lady. "I give it back to you, for your lady's sake. Go your ways, sir, and have your hurt seen to, for you bleed apace, and ride no more against Elizabeth de Echyngham".

She watched him ride away, still nursing his hand, and scabbarded her sword.

"The follies of mankind never cease to amaze me, friend John" she remarked sadly. "That foolish lad might even now be in the arms of his lady, whoever she may be, instead of in pain".

Knelle grinned. "He will remember your ladyship and 'tis all to the good. Yet that was a famous trick o' the wrist".

"Something I learned from my father, many years ago. Useful in terminating folly, such as this. Yet a concession not to be recommended in battle, my dear John. Had I met him in a melee, he would not have ridden off".

"Will go bail he would not. Yet I marvel within my mind, my Lady, as to which of the two sisters Echyngham is the best".

"Why, John" Elizabeth laughed, "Meg could not be equalled with the flail or the axe. The sword is my weapon, always was. And yet I feel myself losing some of my strength. I grow old, John, and soon I shall not be able to heft swords like this. I see the day when I shall have to wield lighter weapons. 'Tis a sadness, growing old. Yet habits of a lifetime count for much. Mayhap I have a few more years left".

"'Tis so to be hoped, my Lady. And as to strength, I observe no diminution of your strength in practice".

"Then" she replied, more cheerfully, "mayhap I do imagine it. And now, John, since I am so accoutred, we will ride to Battle, where I have business with the new Abbot, Master William Meresham".

Soon after this they were walking the battlements in the sun, and talking about wood clearances. The looked north-west, where the ground dropped sharply to the valley floor. "They do say" Knelle mused, not without humour, "there are dragons in the Andredeswald".

Elizabeth smiled. "The only dragons I recognise are those with a sword in their hand. Have never seen one that breathed fire".

With mock-gravity, Knelle suggested: "Could mount an expedition!".

"Nay, not so. Enough to do here". But Knelle was only jesting.

It is difficult to appreciate the configuration of the land that they saw without a prodigious effort of imagination. But if it be held that the Weald of Sussex is leafy today, as it is, it was trebly so in their day. If one stands on the site of her castle today and looks around, one still looks upon the deep, blue goodness of the Weald. When they looked east to where St. John's Cross stood on its hill, and where Meg had died so bravely, it was all woodland. And a few miles from where they stood was the vast forest of Andredeswald (of Saxon descent, Knelle used this name) or 'the Chase of Ashdown in the Honour of the Eagle' as Elizabeth knew it; this stretched from the Kent border to the county of Southampton, and was, until 1377, a Royal Forest. In that year Edward III had given it to John of Gaunt for sporting purposes and that Duke had a hunting lodge at Maresfield, four leagues to the west. The forests were protected by as barbarous a set of laws as man could devise. But there were not lacking men who would infringe these laws, and having infringed them would utilise the deep, almost impenetrable forest as a sanctuary, gathering around them men as disaffected as themselves, and from their fastness waging war on travellers. Thus, in her old age, Elizabeth de Echyngham, fell victim to the same lawless forces against which she, as Meg before her, had fought for so long.

On 20th September, 1421 Lady Elizabeth rose early, about six, as elderly people are prone to do. She had slept but fitfully, and had dreamed that her sister, Kate and Ursula came to her and told her this was her day to die. She had woken on a start and, being a reasonable woman, had laughed at herself. She ate her usual frugal breakfast, washed down with a small measure of wine. Then, attired in a loose blue robe, she sat patiently while her hair, once dark but now flecked with grey, was combed and arranged in comely fashion. "You may now leave me and tell John Knelle to attend me in one hour's time". The woman curtsied and withdrew, wondering why Knelle had not lain with her that night. Bess too wondered but she had no hold on the man. If he wished to fish other waters..... She shrugged, and laughed.

Elizabeth looked from her chamber window and saw that the day was good. How many more would she see? One had to be realistic. She was an ancient lady, with the reaper breathing down her neck. And if that dream was not a dream, this might be her last morning. She dreaded the approach of winter, but now took a deep breath of air and found it warm and good.

When Knelle came to her, he found her in mail and knew she was for the road this day. She smiled, motioning him to sit, yet he did not, insisting always, in reverential fashion, in maintaining, in the day, the difference between his office and her rank. And she loved him for it. He suited her, now that the heat of former years had departed. As he would say, humorously, her lust had grown rusty. Knelle was grey now and did not move as fast as he once had, for he was plagued with rheumatism. A younger man would have served her with more despatch but he suited her very well. And she was in no hurry. He was her last link with the past, with Meg, with Kate, with Ursula.

"John" she began, "you know that I have made a grant of land to the Abbey of Rothersbridge. Today is the day appointed to sign the document, before notarisation. Thus, we must ride an hour after noon. I would have you arm me".

"Lady, you know well there are robbers said to infest the abbey road".

"Then I must wear a bevor, must I not, John?".

He saw he was not going to move her, and being a wise man did not persist, attending to his office with care. He was buckling on the long knightly spurs when she sighed: "John, if you would rather not attend me.....".

He was hurt. "Have I ever deserted Echyngham? Failed to protect you with my body if need be? Not served you to the top of my bent?".

"Nay, nay, John" she murmured, soothingly, "no lady has ever had less to complain of in her squire. I did but think of the danger. As you say, robbers do infest.....".

He snorted. "And were trouble to come, where else would I be but at your side? And who better to share it with than your ladyship".

Her glance was tender. "Mayhap you are right, John. 'Twould be best if you were there. I know well you would not wish to live without Bess".

He grunted, watching her testing her sword for reach. It was a light weapon but with it she was as dangerous as ever. Her reflexes were not quite as sharp as in years gone by, but there the deficiencies ended. She carried harness well, erect and unbent, its well distributed strength affecting her not a whit. "Good for my age, would you not say, John?". She still had that dimple when she smiled he noticed, and her greatest fault, if fault it was, was self-pride.

Knelle grinned. "As always. Indestructible".

Gently she rebuked: "Say not so. Such talk misfortunes a person".

So they rode, backed by young, lusty fellows with good Sussex names. It was a fair day that made you glad to be alive, a peerless sky wherein birds sang for very joy. As they reached the hill-top, she looked over Sussex laid out before her with pride and happiness. But one day soon she would have to leave all this. It grieved her mightily, yet she thrust it from her, knowing well that there was little point in fretting over the inevitable.

On arrival at the abbey she told her men to stretch their legs and that she would not be long.

She was received with ceremony that befitted a benefactress, Abbot John Lunsford fluttering around the great lady like a twittering bird, anxious to please and plucking at his habit in very nervousness. Bess was used to such exhibitions, accepting as the reverence due to her quality. She took the quill and affixed her signature to the documents, and this being duly witnessed, she smiled, well pleased that Masses would be said for the repose of her soul.

Returning her smile, Lonsford said: "You will take some wine with me?".

"An invitation I shall be pleased to accept, for it is a warm day". Sipping it appreciatively, she lifted her eyes to his. "From your own vines?".

"Even so".

"'Tis excellent".

He bowed. "I must thank you for coming today, Lady Elizabeth".

"A small matter".

"And yet you are no longer young".

"'Tis true, alas. And I feel it every day".

"Yet you carry armour easily".

"A question of habit. Habit is all. I am an old lady 'tis true, but all my life.....". She shrugged. "You will have heard".

"Ay. Yet you are greatly loved".

Her lips twitched as if in pain. "'Twas not always so, Abbot. I was young and foolish, ay, and arrogant too. I was much hated. I speak of the time before the great revolt, forty years ago. Yet have I learned wisdom. 'Twould be sad indeed if at the end of our journey we had learned nothing".

"The end of your journey?".

"Come, sir, it cannot be long delayed in the nature of things. I do not complain, I have had a good life, in womanly-wise". His glance wavered. "I have lived long, seen three kings. Some would say I have lived too long. My sweet sister, Margaret, died too early, but most honourably. Yet how she would have loved to have seen, as I have, the crowning mercy of Azincourt. This would have given her great happiness, she being a warlike lady. For myself, I am content to go at any time".

"Daughter, you fear death?".

"Nay, never that" she replied, stoutly. "'Tis not death I fear. It has been my constant companion, these forty or fifty years. 'Tis the manner of my death that exercises my thoughts. I am affeared of disease, I freely confess".

"I too, lady. When I think on the deaths that men and women die, I fear".

"For myself, Abbot, I have always hoped to die in the field, cleanly and quickly. I am a soldierly wench. I tell you nothing new". She smiled sadly, not without bitterness. "In this world of ours, ladies are not much regarded. We are hardly made in God's image, by common consent. Had I been born a man, I would have been hailed as a knight. As it is, I have been reviled as a monstrosity, a traitor to my sex. Men hate me for being as good as

they, ladies for being what they dare not be. Yet my sister and I had a light to live by and it was enough for us".

Ignoring what he could not refute, the priest commented: "Ay, for a member of the nobility, an ambition to die on steel is good. I am myself gently born and had I not been the youngest son.....".

"You say true. Steel is good. Yet I would not despise an arrow in the carcase. I have fallen so in my time. Yet I agree, steel is best".

She went out to her men, apologising for keeping them so long. She gained her saddle as she always had, without help, and Lonsford, bowing to her from the gateway, was astonished. She raised her hand and led them forth.

The road from the abbey was flat for a space, then it rose a little. There was then a level piece, followed by a steeper rise, and beyond it a sharp leftward corner, at which point there were high banks. Today this corner still remains although the banks are not so high. It was a perfect place for an ambush. Leading her men around the corner, Elizabeth was met by a hail of arrows, some of which clattered from her armour but some emptied saddles behind her. Turning to inspect the damage she had a sickening stab of pain to see Knelle on his back with an arrow in his chest. Her cry of anguish and pain brought order out of chaos. Within seconds she had drawn her sword and taken charge. Her men milled about in shock and indecision. She could do nothing for the dead but much she could do for the living.

"Spur! Spur! Dolts! Save yourselves!".

Heavily armoured, she had more chance than they. Mostly young men now, inexperienced, they thundered past her, forcing her to stand still. Again she took a discharge, but she was content as she had saved so many lives.

As the last man passed, she wheeled her horse, at the very millisecond that the leader of the miscreants leapt on her from a bank, halberd in hand. Its savage point turned on her breastplate. She attacked without fear, slashing at his face, opening it from ear to jaw. He reeled, screeching; then closed again, stabbing for her throat. Again the point turned on her beavor. She slashed at him again, blood streaming from his neck. He went down, and thinking he was finished she found time to look at the body of her lover to see if there were signs of life. There were none; the big hands were stilled for ever. Then her horse sank beneath her, an arrow in its neck. Before she could loose her sabatons from the stirrup it rolled over, dead, trapping her. She swore, knowing herself finished.

Her enemy, though bleeding to death, rolled over and staggered to his feet. Then Bess saw three shadowy figures standing by her horses; they were in steel and one held out her arms to her. She stared up at their compassionate faces, and was not afraid but smiled. Turning her head she saw through the slit of her bascinet her enemy running at her with the halberd, teeth bared. She could almost certainly have saved herself but a great weariness swept over her. She made no attempt at defence; her course had been run. She knew it and welcomed death.

The halberd sliced through the buckle strap that held backplate to breastplate, driving through the gap thus made, tearing open the links of her mail, piercing the leather suit and plunging deep into the body. Bess did not see it happen. Her head had already turned to her sister, whose face bore great tenderness. There was a shattering bolt of agony and she was in comforting arms, free of the body at last.

Her men reined in and awaited their Captain, and when she came not, for shame's sake they returned. They were in time to see the silver body jerk once, before laying still on her side, head partly hidden by couch grass.

Rage and shame sent them back with murderous intent to those who now howled in triumph over her body, striking at she who could feel nothing. The fight, now they were down from the banks, was sharp and bloody. Some robbers, striving with fingers to claw up the steep banks, were hacked down from behind until at last a terrible silence descended upon the sunlit road.

Their task done, the men-at-arms struggled to free their Captain from beneath her dead horse; which, having been achieved, they laid her on her back. And the rough but honest young fellows wept at seeing her so piteously slain after doing her duty to them so nobly. Yet, when they ventured, hesitantly, to raise her visor, they found not agony, but a smile hovering about her lips. Young Jim Attwood, signing himself, closed her eyes, counting it, as long as he drew breath, the greatest honour of his life.

He glanced sideways at the big man who lay in his blood, face down in the road. He stood up. "A lusty rogue" he muttered, "know we him, lads?". Turning the body over with his foot, he recoiled, the colour draining from his ruddy face. "By all the Saints in the calendar, 'tis.....'tis.....".

"Ay, we know him" Harry Pont whispered, signing himself. "It be Simon of Bellhurst.....the outlaw's son".

They had all heard the story, for Bellhurst, when in his cups, would always inveigh against Elizabeth de Echyngham. Nobody heeded him, making allowances for the past and the fact that all men accounted him sick in the head. Yet local taverns rang with his harangues. Men were mighty tired of such talk. The revolt was long over, dim in the memory; only the ancient ones remembered it. And things were better now, and Lady Elizabeth greatly loved. Moreover, they were freemen and had a vested interest in peace. But they let Bellhurst have his say, for he was a big man and a dangerous. "My father, on his deathbed" Simon would say, his speech slurred, "ordered me to kill the bitch". He would glower around at the assembly. "Use my halberd, boy, or my boar spear, says he. The whore left my wife, your mother, boy, for the boars to feed on. Make her suffer like she made my Emma suffer. Slay her, boy, stick her, tear her heart out and make thy father rest in Heaven. Fail me, and take my curse on you and your descendants through all time". Bellhurst would hiccough, and shout: "And so I will, by God, come time".

And now he had, and remembering the young men felt a deep chill flood over them, and they signed themselves in horror. "Ay, and he be dead, God be praised. Thought it was all tavern talk. Yet, mates, see what hate does" muttered Tom Hoad.

"That be true enough. But let us not stand here, jaw-cracking. Lady Elizabeth's blood stains the ground. And there lies Master Knelle, and our comrades. Do we what needs to be done and depart with despatch. You, Harry Pont, ride to Echyngham, to Sir Thomas and tell him what has befallen here. Quick about it now, lad. Spur, spur!".

They bore the dead slowly to Glottingham and no body was more reverently handled than that of Elizabeth. For more than thirty years the two sisters had led them and their fathers with great gallantry, and that evening, as the autumn sun dipped below the western horizon, men wept openly for their mistress.

And even as she died, in France Henry V accepted the surrender of Caen.

GLOTTINGHAM CASTLE

This castle, which has vanished from the face of the earth, was a reality and was still being occupied in the early seventeenth century. We know this from the implied evidence of the Mountfield parish register and from excavations carried out on the site by the Robertsbridge Archaeological Society. That it was a viable entity at that time and has vanished so completely, has lead many to think that it was blown up by Sir William Waller's army on its passage through Sussex; he did 'slight' Bodiam Castle and this is not beyond the bounds of possibility. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth century the manor of Etchingham-cum-Salehurst was owned by the Tyrwhitt family of Kettleby, co.Lincs. They were Catholic in religion and the fact that Rutland Tyrwhitt was buried at Mountfield 22.11.1601 (less than a mile distant, instead of at Etchingham) renders it almost certain that they were residing at Glottingham. We can make an educated guess at the reason. It was isolated, very suitable for hearing Mass, untroubled by Churchwardens or Pursuivants. The Robertsbridge Archaeological Society, in their excavation, were able to trace both curtain wall and moat and produce a plan of the establishment. More importantly, several sherds of 'Polycrome' were imported from southern France, large sections of jugs, and other pottery from the relevant period were found. Parts of the castle were standing quite late in the eighteenth century, after which its stones were taken for building purposes and, of course, for road mending. Any walk in the area will testify to this scenario. Nineteenth century antiquarianism came too late to save it, however, for in his 'History of Sussex', published in 1835, T. W. Horsfield reports:- "A space of seven rods by ten rods is contained within the foundations, considerable remains of which have been dug up for the stone within these few years. As the adjoining farm is called Mountfield Park, it is probable that there was once a park belonging to this mansion. The space above described is completely surrounded by a moat now nearly dry". Mark Antony Lower in his 'History of Sussex' (1870) and the Victoria County History of Sussex also mention the site.

ROBERTSBRIDGE ABBEY

The history of the Cistercian abbey (better known than the castle) followed the same general lines as Glottingham. After 1538 this too was used as a quarry and stones from it may be detected at many places in the locality. Some may be espied supporting the bank of a sunken lane leading from the abbey to the church and it is more than likely that the church wall at Salehurst is built from stones taken from the abbey. Houses around the church are also built of this stone. Although the only Cistercian house in Sussex, Robertsbridge Abbey has never been excavated, even though many notables of the period are known to have been buried in the abbey church. Indeed, archaeologists seem incurious as to the fate of the abbey church, which lies beneath the sod in the field between the abbey house and the river Rother. How much the sixteenth century Protestant predators left is unknown but certainly anything of value would have been ripped up and melted down. That would have been the case with any brasses, as referred to by M/s Carminhow.

ETCHINGHAM

Even in the early years of the last century this village was still being rendered as Echingham (as Lower pointed out in 1870 the word 'Etchingham' is improper). The manor house/castle of the Echyngham family has entirely disappeared but we do in fact know the exact site of it. It stood west of the river and north-west of the modern road. This places it virtually on the site of the railway station. It was built of sandstone blocks, and the church stood within the curtilage of the house, doubtless inside the curtain wall. Here again archaeologists have been singularly incurious and no excavation has been carried out. The village of Etchingham is of relatively modern growth, there being hardly any old building in the village High Street. Lower, writing in 1870, remarks:- "There is no proper village in the central portion of

of the parish, the majority of the inhabitants residing at Hurst Green". The inference may therefore be drawn that no centre of population existed in the days of which we speak, merely the manor house, the church and satellite cots clinging to its skirts. That Etchingam possessed no cemetery until Pope Innocent III issued his mandate to provide one in 1357 seems to prove purely a manorial existence as opposed to a community one.

HURST GREEN

The origin of Hurst Green, as given by M/s Carminhow, is of course very fanciful; yet in fact it may not be that far from the truth. The OE word 'hyrst' means 'hill, wood, wooded hill' and the word 'green' is self-explanatory. It was not an ecclesiastical parish until this century (1907) and historically was split between the parishes of Etchingam and Salehurst. There is little old building; the bulk of the village being not inaptly described by C. G. Harper in his 'The Hastings Road' as "very red and raw". That time has to some extent mellowed this judgement, the accuracy of the indictment is not in doubt. Here again, the history of Hurst Green is wrapped up in manorial history.

"THE WALSINGHAM WAY"

The fact that Lady Margaret and Catherine de Cralle rested their horses at Sporle, co. Norfolk may puzzle some people who know well that there is a much more direct road to Walsingham in our own day, via Swaffham. It has to be pointed out that in the fourteenth century the road system was entirely different to that now operating. The road from London in those days followed the following route:- Bishopsgate, Shoreditch, Kingsland, Tottenham, Edmonton, Waltham Cross, Hoddesdon, Ware, Wade's Mill, Puckeridge, Barkway, Barley, Whittlesford, Babraham, Newmarket, Brandon, Weeting, Ickburgh, Hillborough, Pickenham, Sporle, Great Dunham, Litcham, Hempton, East Barsham, North Barsham, Houghton and so to Walsingham. (In their day and for long afterwards, the name of Tottenham was Tottenham High Cross, from the wooden cross, rebuilt in brick at the beginning of the 16th century and faced with stucco in 1809).

MINOR CHARACTERS

The author has obviously raided the mediaeval Muster Rolls for all the surnames used are strictly accurate. Many of the families mentioned are still resident in the area. Names of priests and abbots are accurate; they actually lived at the time.

HERALDRY AND ARMOUR

Here, as befits someone who worked at a French museum famous for its armour collection, the author made every effort to achieve accuracy.